

BLOOD MONEY

JOHN GOODWIN

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BLOOD MONEY

BY

JOHN GOODWIN

*Author of**"The Avenger," "Sealed Orders," etc.*

THIS is a rattling good mystery story, a story of suspense and curiosity from the first to the last page. In England, at the present day, Lord Trent, poverty stricken, with only his castle, invites Elaine Corbyn, a young American heiress, to visit him for a month or two with the hope that his son will fall in love with her.

The girl arrives with her companion, and the son promptly falls in love with the companion, which his father tries to prevent unsuccessfully. It soon becomes evident that the two women have come over from America to escape something sinister, and the old castle becomes a center of a series of fights, resulting in two murders.

The story now becomes a fascinating detective tale, and one exciting adventure, unexpected and almost unbelievable, follows another until eventually the murders are solved, Lord Trent's financial difficulties overcome, and the reason why the beautiful Elaine Corbyn wanted to bury herself in the old castle, and what she feared and ran away from America to escape, is disclosed to the reader in this tense story of murder and blackmail.

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BLOOD MONEY



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by
JOHN GOODWIN

Author of
" *Dead Man's Treasure,*"
" *Sealed Orders,*"
etc.

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BLOOD MONEY

I

"BARRING ACCIDENTS"

WHAT I disliked about the man was that he moved so silently.

I had no idea Linke was near me. I was drowsing before the gun-room fire, the cat on one knee and the spaniel snoring at my feet. It was the only home-like room in that great house. And there was already a resolve forming in my head to quit. . . . Clear out of this tame country and voyage West again, take another grip at fortune with both hands. They're big hands and they ought to be able to hold tight; especially if one isn't too particular about the way they get there.

My eyes were closed; I smelt the dust of a trail, heard the creak of harness, felt between my knees the heaving flanks of a horse, saw the plain stretching up the foot-hills and the Great Range beyond . . . and then a word dispelled the vision and I heard Linke's respectful, oily voice at my elbow.

"His lordship wishes to see you sir."

"Who?" I said, opening one eye.

"His lordship, sir—in the library."

I suppose I shall never get used to hearing Dad called that. But there's no doubt it suits my father very well; it fits him like a glove, he looks the part. I never shall. I don't even want to.

When the footman had gone—I have no idea how much we owed him in wages—I got up, brushed the ash from my jacket, and started for the door. And there I hesitated, scarcely knowing why. I wonder, had I known then what was to come of that commonplace summons, whether I should have just reached for my hat and walked out of Stanways—turned my back on Fate? Yet at the time I had

no idea that Dad wanted anything of importance; except perhaps to ask me if I had any small change.

Though the end is not yet in sight, so many unexpected things have happened that it has occurred to me to note down a record of them in the hope that I may last out to the finish—just the plain facts, for I have not any imagination. I am still wondering, and it's my theory that the police themselves are uncertain, which of us who are concerned will feel the kindly hand laid on his shoulder and take that nine o'clock in the morning walk . . . just ten steps into the next room where the Prison Chaplain and the doctor and the gentleman with the bandage are waiting. Three clear Sundays after the trial.

No, there couldn't have been any turning back. Even if I had known what was in the wind I should have gone ahead. And in cutting it out I wouldn't have crossed Jenny's path. There are compensations; there's just that hope and glamour that keeps a fellow's head up. The whole thing has been too wonderful even to imagine oneself outside it.

So I walked out across the great hall of Stanways, on what seemed the dulllest of evenings among dull surroundings, and strolled into the library. I can't feel the reverence I ought for Stanways. The absurdity tickles me; that this great barrack of a house should be ours, and that the death of an uncle and a remote cousin should have installed Dad as ninth Lord Trent of Denham, leaving him at the same time nothing but debts to bless himself with.

I found my father sitting in the big chair before the library fire, and except for the admirable cigar he was smoking I have never seen anybody look more like a portrait, by an old master. That white hair of his, his strong clear-cut features, and that indescribable air of distinction. He is the only living person for whom I had any real affection and I believe he returns it, though we have not much in common.

“Sit down Ken,” he said amiably, “and have a cigar, I called you in to tell you that the luck has turned. I’m a believer in luck—always have been.”

“Time it did turn,” said I, ignoring the cigars and filling an old briar pipe.

“You haven’t struck any great success yet, have you.”

“If that last show in Yukon had come off I should have made a useful little fortune. I worked like the devil for it.”

“And came out of it with scarcely a cent, a bullet in your shoulder, and urgent enquiries after you. You call two or three thousand pounds a fortune. Ken, I am going to put a fortune in your way, if you have the sense to take hold of it.”

“I can take hold of anything,” I said, “if the scheme isn’t too thick. What’s the amount?”

“What do you say to a million?”

I looked at him in wonder. There was a thoughtful smile about the corners of his mouth, but he was entirely cool, sane and serious.

“When one is very hard up—as you and I are—and the chance arrives for acquiring a considerable sum, one cannot afford to be painfully puritanical about the means one uses for getting hold of it.”

“Go on sir,” I said. “So far the court is with you.”

“There arrives to-day from New York, I understand—a girl, twenty-three years of age, independent, and I have no doubt, very charming. Her name is Elaine Corbyn, and she owns at least four million dollars in her own right. She will be our guest at Stanways.”

I shifted in my seat. I began to feel uncomfortable.

“But why?” I asked. “I don’t mean from your point of view, but what does she expect to get out of it? Why should she come here?”

“As a paying guest—very paying indeed, Ken. We shall be her hosts, she will be under our protection. She wishes to see

something of England, to be properly vouched for, and of course to be launched in—such society as Trent of Denham can give her the entrée to.”

I looked at Dad. Then I sat back and laughed till the chair shook.

“You know, Father, you must have been reading yellow-backed novels dug up in the village library! You surely don’t believe there are American women who would pay real money to stay at a peer’s house—and such a house as ours? If you do, somebody’s been stringing you along!”

“You are wrong. You have roughed it among Western prospectors—useful, horny-handed people who live on beans and bacon; you know nothing of society in what are now the wealthiest centres in the world,” said my father calmly. “I spent three weeks in New York myself last year. Before I left—much regretted by everybody—the people who really count were most charming to me, though I was not Trent of Denham then, but just Hugo Rolfe. I paved the way.

“And to prove it, my boy, the whole thing is already fixed up by an agent of mine over there, and she arrives to-night. Here is a letter from her, written before she sailed.”

He gave it to me. It was written in a clear, decisive hand.

“Dear Lord Trent,

“Barring accidents, I shall arrive at Euston, London, by the boat-train on the 25th. I shall be glad if, as you suggest, your son Mr. Kenyon Rolfe will meet me and take me to Stanways.

“It is understood that I do not wish anything to be known about my intended visit, or my name mentioned to anyone, when I actually arrive. Indiscretion might be dangerous.

“Please treat this as confidential.

“Yours very truly,

“ELAINE CORBYN.”

II

THE EAVESDROPPER

THIS letter got hold of me.

"Dangerous!" I said. "Have you any idea what she means by that?"

"No," said my father after a pause.

"This is a girl who knows her own mind, and her way about, anyhow," said I. "Who on earth is she?"

"I can give you one solid fact that you can rely upon," repeated my father patiently, "for I've satisfied myself about it formally—she has four million dollars. A very desirable guest."

"And she's really coming to this house—alone?"

"Not entirely alone. I understand she is bringing a woman companion with her; an attendant of some sort. I don't know who it is—possibly a distressed gentlewoman. I don't know whether gentlewomen become distressed as easily in America as they do here."

"But seriously Dad, whoever Elaine Corbyn may be, and however large her bank balance, what do you expect to get out of her and how?"

"You are a little dense to-night, Ken," said my father quietly, "leaving all other questions aside, it is of course my suggestion that you should marry her."

I rose slowly out of my chair.

"Marry her!"

"Why yes. Eight hundred thousand would support you very comfortably. And Stanways into the bargain."

I stared at him blankly.

"It doesn't occur to you Dad, that she is likely to have different views for herself?"

"Turn a little away from the light, Ken. Yes. You are

unusually good-looking; you have that kind of laughing, devil-may-care air that fits a man to face whatever turns up and make the best of it. You are attractive. And a big, hefty fellow at that; what the Westerners call a hundred-per-cent man. You have never had quite the manner I would have liked you to have; one sees very little left in you of Winchester and Oxford . . . but that may be all to the good. Anyway you are a Rolfe; you will eventually be Lord Trent of Denham——”

He paused a moment and waited.

“What’s the matter with you Ken?” he said, eyeing me curiously. “You remarked, only yesterday, you were so sick of being hard up that you would let nothing that looked like money get by you. That you were ready to hold up a bank, or marry a girl with money enough to put you out of reach of trouble. I wouldn’t recommend the first scheme; that’s immoral, besides it’s unsafe. But as for the other—I’m giving you the chance of a lifetime.”

Well, a man may say a thing like that, and mean it, at the time. But to have it set right down in front of you is a different matter, and every complex in me rose up in revolt against it.

“Listen,” I said, “I want to point out something you’ve overlooked. Look at that letter again. There’s more in this than any commonplace paying-guest affair. There’s something very queer about this business.”

“Exactly. Something—queer. Well, that you’ll presently discover, and it is going to be a great help to you. Besides,” he added whimsically, “mystery—perhaps peril—romance——”

I was not listening to him, I had a sudden and vivid conviction that we were not alone; that the library was not quite so private as he supposed.

I could have sworn I heard just the faintest possible rustle

against the closed door. Without being especially thin-skinned, I felt that our conversation was the very last that I should wish anybody to overhear.

The conviction was so strong that I stepped to the door and snatched it suddenly open, as quick as a flash. . . .

If this were a film story instead of a record of facts, no doubt a crestfallen eavesdropper would have tumbled into the room on his face. Nothing of that sort happened. As soon as the door was open I looked up and down the passage. It was empty. Yet I felt certain I had been right.

If there had been a listener he was an uncommonly quick and efficient one—too quick for me. I followed along to the open door of the little hat and coat lobby a few yards down the corridor, without losing a moment.

And there was Linke, the footman, sedately brushing my father's brown Homburg. I looked him over thoughtfully, before speaking.

"Linke," I said, "are you a professional in the matter of keyholes, or just an amateur?"

He turned to me with respectful astonishment.

"I am afraid I don't understand you sir."

"Don't you?"

My eye strayed again to his right trouser-knee; on the black of the cloth was a tiny fleck of crimson silk. There is a crimson floss rug outside the library door. I looked at his bland, dark face, his attitude and expression were so perfectly correct. And such a wave of wrath and humiliation urged up in me, that if he had uttered another word I should certainly have pitched him through the window on to the drive.

He maintained his respectful silence. I turned abruptly and went back to the library. There was no use in saying or doing anything more. My father had not moved from his chair.

"Someone listening?" he said.

"Yes."

"Linke, of course?"

"Yes, Linke. How long have you had that man?"

My father pressed the bell-push, and after a brief interval the footman appeared.

"Linke," said my father quietly. "You have been ten days in my service, I believe. You will leave it within the hour. Go to the housekeeper for your week's wages in advance, and get out."

The man looked so wounded and surprised that I decided I had been mistaken about him. He began to protest and ask for reasons. My honoured parent is usually mildness itself. His voice could not have been quieter, but I have never seen any man's eyes look more dangerous than his did at that moment, as he turned them on Linke.

"I have done my best to give satisfaction here. I——"

"You will give me more satisfaction when you are out of the house," said my father. "Be off the premises before eight o'clock."

Linke who was very pale, took one look at him and said no more. He made a sad, crushed little bow of submission, and went out.

"I hope the housekeeper has funds enough to pay him," said Dad, moving to a chair on the other side of the hearth, "I suppose you haven't any change about you Ken? To return to matters of importance—you had better get away yourself now, time is running short; and remember my boy when you meet Miss Corbyn that first impressions are everything, you should take care to make as good a one as you can. I advise you——"

"Great heavens!" I said in exasperation, "you're surely not sticking to that idea . . . even if there were nothing else to it, this flunkey of yours heard what we said—heard us

talking about the girl the way we were . . . it made me sick, and I can tell you I came pretty near to wringing his neck——”

“Nonsense,” said my father calmly, “neither of us raised our voices—as you are doing now in your excitement.”

“You think he didn’t hear us,” said I, hoping devoutly it was so.

“I’m pretty certain he heard nothing that need concern you; if I thought he did I would take steps myself; though really what does it matter what a fellow of that type hears or does not hear? Get your mind clear of it. Of course you’re going ahead with this, Ken. You may think you’re not, but you are—facts are going to be too strong for you. And I prophesy you’ll find it very pleasant and attractive.”

“Look here,” said I, “I had quite settled that it wouldn’t do, when you first put it to me. But now—will you understand finally that I’ll have nothing whatever to do with it!”

“Ken,” he said gently, “there’s another reason, though I hate to mention it. We care a good deal for each other, you know, we’ve always been loyal. A year ago I gave you my help—not for the first time—I pulled you out of the tightest kind of place—did I not—at a certain risk and a heavy sacrifice to myself.”

That was true enough.

“Well,” said my father, “I am in a tighter place now than ever you were, Ken, and unless help of some sort arrives pretty soon; unless something happens on the big scale, I’m up against disaster so thorough that it doesn’t bear thinking about.”

“Whatever it is,” said I, “you know I’ll stand by you.”

He got up, and laid a hand on my shoulder.

“My boy,” he said affectionately, “you know I’m not trying to drive you; I’ve never done that in my life, and we’re neither of us the sort that can stand driving. Shelve the idea for the present then—don’t worry about it. But you’ve

said you'd help me; I hold you to that—just get along and meet Miss Corbyn and bring her here. I'm not asking so much of you."

"Of course, I'll do that."

"You had better hurry. The 8.55 Euston; you've barely an hour and a half."

"Why on earth have you sprung a big thing on me at the eleventh hour?"

My father's cheek twitched. He gave a confident little laugh.

"You won't let me down, now. If it had been broached too early, you might have brooded over it till you got scared about this girl, and probably bolted—you great oaf!"

I should say he was not far wrong. As it was, I went out and got myself ready. I had not the least idea what preparations one should make for meeting a female paying guest with four million dollars. So I just put on my cap and ulster and made for the garage.

III

THE WARNING

WE had no chauffeur at Stanways then : we drove ourselves, and the care of the car was my job. As I came out by the side entrance twenty minutes later and passed the back steps I caught sight of Linke, standing alone, in the gloom.

He was muffled in an overcoat, and there was something so forlorn and unhappy in the fellow's attitude that I paused. He had been prompt enough in obeying the order to leave. He had no luggage with him, it had probably been piled on to the carrier's lorry that calls at seven-thirty. The man looked a picture of desolation.

I had troubles enough of my own to keep me busy, but I was feeling a certain uneasiness about Linke. It stuck in my mind that I might have been altogether mistaken about him, and if so, he had been given rather a raw deal. I feel a sort of unreasoning sympathy with any man who draws another man's wage, and can be thrown out at will.

"So you're adrift, Linke?" I said.

"Yes, sir."

"Got another job in view?"

"No, sir."

I have been adrift myself. And on the impulse I said :

"Would a couple of pounds help you to tide things over?"

"Two pounds? Thank you, sir," he said suavely. "Twenty would be more useful, at the moment."

At that I stopped dead. Once more I revised my estimate of Linke. I have had many varied experiences, but this one was new to me.

It was particularly curious that he should have mentioned twenty pounds—evidently the man thought he knew something that was worth that—for I had just that sum in my

note-case; it was pretty nearly all I possessed except a battered gold watch and some small change.

"At the moment?" I said slowly.

"As an instalment against further benefits a little later on, Mr. Rolfe," said Linke, "and you will find it will pay you pretty well; but of course if you prefer——"

"Linke," I said, "the two pound offer is withdrawn. You are going to have the hiding of a lifetime."

I suppose that to come to one's hands with a discharged servant is another of those things that no gentleman ever does. There may be people who can receive the demand of a black-mailer with serenity but I am not one of them. I think he was quite as astonished at the way I took it as I had been at his proposal; my temper had been pretty well roughed up already. Folks who ask for this sort of thing ought to get it.

Linke managed to duck under my swing, and the next moment I had clinched with him.

But directly I had him in my hands he went all limp in them. He was tall and bulky but there was no fighting balance in the man at all; he collapsed. And one cannot decently thrash a jelly. I spun him round and applied my foot once, releasing him at the same moment. He was propelled quite an appreciable distance and subsided at full length on the flower-bed across the gravel path.

"If there's another word from you about that," I said through my teeth, "you'll get hurt, instead of being played with."

He seemed satisfied. He got up with unexpected speed, almost in one motion, and darted away into the darkness with a snarl. It sounded to me more like the snarl of a beast than a man.

I stared after him—the evening was certainly full of surprises. I was lightly shod and the sole of my foot was tingling; it had impacted on a hard unyielding object in

Linke's hip pocket. Linke must have been tingling too, for the kick was a hearty one. It is to be hoped it did him good ; it certainly did me good, I felt immensely soothed.

A pocket-flask—if the hard object was that—is an unusual thing for a footman to carry, especially if he has a key to the pantry. But so is an automatic pistol. However I did not worry, for I had recently come from a country where both these equipments are less uncommon than they are here. I considered I was rid of Linke. One does make these errors.

But as I turned away I glanced up at the open lighted window overhead—the back window of the library—and halted. A shadow flitted away from the blind. Someone, it seemed to me, had heard what Linke said, and also what happened to Linke. That did not trouble me either. I had done the only thing that I felt could be done, and I wanted to get away. In a few minutes I had the car out and was humming along the park road, feeling considerably better. In fact I remember laughing aloud as I turned through the gates and trod on the accelerator.

Linke's action did rather puzzle me. To make a confident attempt at blackmail like that, he must surely give me credit for some knowledge which I didn't possess. I didn't see how he could have done it solely on the strength of what he may have overheard at the library door. Yet I was not sure. On the face of it it looked like the action of a fool, but I was convinced Linke was no fool. He might have made a blunder, which is a different thing . . . the sharpest rogues make those sometimes. Perhaps I had forced his hand in some way by catching him eavesdropping and getting him fired. Certainly the best thing for everybody.

Better still to wash the whole affair out of one's mind altogether, it didn't really concern me. I dropped the windows of the car and opened the screen, letting the rush of cold

clean air roar past me. It seemed to sweeten things up, and blow the annoyance and bitterness out of my head. The park and its gloomy elm trees was left behind, I threaded through the by-ways and soon swung sharp to the right and was spinning at full speed along the Great North Road.

It was good to be moving again . . . and that car could move; an eight Chrysler saloon. I don't know how we came to have a Chrysler, I remember wondering how Dad had raised the money for the first instalment. However, he has his own methods, and as for me I take these things as they come, without question. Stanways is in Hertfordshire, forty miles from Town; I could make Euston in the hour even allowing for the London traffic; it meant travelling at sixty the greater part of the way. Speed sharpens the faculties; I can think best when going an even sixty. But what was there to think about? I felt more inclined to chuckle.

I had given my father a straight refusal; but I was beginning to feel intensely intrigued and interested. Eight hundred thousand . . . the beat of the car's engine seemed to sing it aloud as she soared along over the high chalk downs before the drop into Stevenage village. Eight hundred thousand . . . Call it a cool million.

I shall never forget that drive. The night wind blowing free; broad away to the right the blood-red of the afterglow tinged a bank of dark clouds. Eastwards through the left window, the purple black of the sky washed with silver by a rising moon. Due south and ahead the vaguer, vaster glow of the lights of London. I felt a sense of something impending; something that I could not measure.

That red glow to the right seemed to bear me company all the way, never fading from the sky, as I turned into the great arterial road beyond Welwyn and let the car rip, till I slowed up in the streets of Hendon and out through prosaic Regent's Park into the roar of the traffic . . . fifty-five minutes from

Stanways; the Magic Carpet of Bagdad has nothing on the modern car.

I parked her at the arrival stage at Euston and locked the steering-wheel. The usual loafer appeared at my elbow, as if from nowhere.

"Look after the car for yer, sir?"

I nodded assent. I have had too many losses from light-fingered folks in London to grudge the tip for having one's 'bus watched when she is left alone. I passed through to No. 7 Platform.

At Euston I always feel at home; I use the line a good deal; even the loafer was an old acquaintance, and a porter saluted me as I went through.

The boat train was late. I bought a paper and stood by the barrier awhile, reading the football news. Here in London, with these prosaic surroundings to remind me how commonplace life is, the puzzling events at Stanways faded out to nothing. It seemed useless to attach any importance to them. I was here as an unpaid chauffeur to bring a guest home to my father's house; that was all there was to it.

While I was absorbed in the reporter's account of a goal smartly scored against the English team by Scotland someone touched me on the arm, and I looked down at a small boy with a sharp and picturesquely dirty face, who held an envelope half concealed in one paw.

"This here's for you, guv'nor."

"Yes," I said warily, "what's the idea?"

"Dunno. Gent over there by the bookstall gave it me, told me to pass it across to you, and sloped off. He gave me a shilling, an' I'm to get another from you. That's all."

"Try somethin' easier," I said. "It's cattle-show week, you'll show a good profit if you keep on doing this."

"Well, that's what he said and I don't know 'im no more than I know you," said the boy resentfully, and held up the

envelope so that I could read it. "Mr. Kenyon Rolfe." "That your name or ain't it. He marked you an' told me to hand it across."

I did what I suppose anyone else would have done in my place, gave him the shilling, and found in the envelope a sheet of note-paper such as one buys at the railway book-stall; it carried a message of three lines in a neat, copy-book round-hand, written with an indelible pencil.

"Unless you are a fool you will keep out of matters which you do not understand. Take this for a first and final warning; if you set any value on your life leave Elaine Corbyn alone."

I read this cool piece of impertinence and burst into irrepressible laughter, startling an old lady beside me, who moved away indignantly. I looked round for the boy. He had disappeared with my shilling.

It seemed to me that I had stepped straight out of everyday life into the middle of a mystery story—the sort of thing that everyone reads but that can never possibly happen. Who was the lunatic who had sent me this message? He must have some reason for it; no one could do such a thing without a motive. It struck me that there are people with such a sense of the melodramatic that they can't help making use of it, even when they are most in earnest. I have met with them before—the actor type.

Was it his idea that he could scare me? It did not seem likely that this had any connection with the unspeakable Linke—whom I had left forty miles behind. Perhaps this was an opposition firm. And yet it was a little difficult to separate the two in one's mind.

It suddenly came home to me that I was intended to take this warning very seriously. I glanced at the note, and was about to rip it across and toss it away, when I thought better

of that and stowed it carefully in my letter-case. With any luck I might get to close quarters with the sender: then I could make a definite response.

For the first time, the scheme that my father had put forward took a clear shape, and began to appeal to me. This mysterious, insolent opposition acted like a spur. I felt a decisive interest in the unknown Elaine Corbyn, and a desire to get next to her.

The boat train had arrived, and the platform was in a turmoil. I passed through the barrier. My instructions were a little vague, but there was no real difficulty about it. In a few minutes I had found her.

IV

ELAINE CORBYN

I HELD back for a brief interval to be sure I was making no mistake, and to get an impression of her. For now I felt sure that the step I was about to take was going to make a big difference in my life.

Elaine Corbyn was standing beside a large pile of very new and expensive-looking baggage. I took stock of her as the hunter does when he is stalking an exceptional quarry. She was rather above the average height, and carried herself well; she wore a costly mink mantle, and there was rather an arrogant little air of command about her. Of her good looks there was no doubt at all.

Her features were small and regular, her chin firm; her hair that dark coppery auburn that goes so well with a very white skin. Bright, darkish hazel eyes, very wide and alert, that missed nothing. She was strikingly attractive; I felt my interest rise like mercury in the sun; all the more so for that unsigned note in my breast pocket. If there was a job for me, I would see it through.

I went straight up to her and raised my hat.

"Miss Corbyn?" I said. "I'm Kenyon Rolfe."

She turned to me with a smile, and quick keen inspection that seemed to travel right through me. I felt as if I were being judged, like a horse. Then she held out her hand frankly.

"How did you pick me out?" she said a trifle abruptly. "We've never met."

"That's easy. Waited till the passengers had thinned out and looked for a girl who was obviously expecting somebody she wasn't quite sure of, and wondering why he hadn't turned up. Clothes with the New York cut—there's nothing like it anywhere else. And your luggage is marked 'E. C.' "

Her eyes twinkled.

"That's rather cute," she said mockingly, "though its not quite the right answer—there was room for a compliment here."

I laughed.

"Sorry. I'd better tell you at once I've no parlour tricks."

"We shall get on none the worse—I haven't many myself. How are you going to get me to Stanways Hall?"

"It's a short hour's drive, and my car's ready."

She nodded, and looked round her impatiently, with just the shadow of a frown.

"Come on, Jenny," she called to a girl who was moving towards us, carrying a square, black morocco leather case, heavily strapped. "Hurry, please!"

I remember the attendant whom my father had mentioned; lady's maid or companion—I wondered which. . . . She was small and slight, very plainly and dowdily dressed in grey, with a long, tweed coat. There was a timid, pathetic air about the girl, as if she found life none too smooth. I could see little of her face under the deep felt hat.

"This is Miss Craddock," said Elaine Corbyn briefly. "Jenny, meet the Honourable Kenyon Rolfe."

The girl looked up at me shyly as I saluted her, and I believe in that moment I forgot there was anybody else in Euston Station, or for that matter in London or in the entire two hemispheres. There was a charm in those fairy blue eyes and that exquisite, wistful little face that I can't put into words at all.

Yet she had a slightly puzzled expression, as if I were not at all what she expected and she had been looking for something very different. And just a glint of friendly laughter behind those eyes of hers. She looked so absurdly young, too. If this were the age of hair, I should have said she had only just put hers up. But it was shingled, of course; rather plainly, it

owed nothing to art . . . a dainty gleaming chestnut gold, and eyebrows just a shade darker. She was as straight as a willow wand, and as slight and supple.

They say that into every one's life a lightning-stroke comes just once; it had never come into mine till then. That appeal and charm—but it is no use trying to describe her. Think of her as you thought of the first woman who quickened the pulses within you that all the rest of them had no art to stir. Though she was not looking her best, she was rather white and tired. There is something about a tired woman that touches a soft spot in me, and I suppose paid attendants are not allowed to be weary.

"Let me take that," I said, relieving her of the black valise.

"Oh no, please!" said Miss Craddock. "I can manage it." But I had it away from her, and as we moved off with the porter's baggage truck following behind I noticed that Elaine Corbyn at once closed in on the other side of me and stayed there till we reached the car park. It didn't occur to me why, at the moment. But I soon decided that this girl was particularly wide awake.

"You haven't a chauffeur?" said Miss Corbyn, running her eyes over the Chrysler while I directed the porter to strap the big trunks on to the carrier.

"We're a bit short of chauffeurs at Stanways just now—I'm driving you down myself," said I, putting the valise inside.

"Wait a moment," said Miss Corbyn. "It's forty miles up country, isn't it? I'm to be driven by Mr. Kenyon Rolfe? Before we get away, I'm intending to be satisfied about that. Anybody here who knows you? Don't let it get your goat."

It was just what I should have expected of this girl. I fished out of my pocket the letter my father had given me, and handed it to her.

"That's my passport."

She nodded, and put the letter into her handbag instead of passing it back. She didn't seem particularly pleased with me; something or other—before this happened—had apparently roughed her up, though I had no idea what it was. But she was uncommonly good-looking, when displeased. It suited her.

"That's all right," she said, "I suppose you've read that letter?"

"Yes. Addressed to the family. And by the way, if there's anything you'd like to tell me about it, this might be a good time. I mean—if there's anything you'd wish me to do. Just as you please, of course . . . I don't want to butt in."

"Nothing, thank you. Until we know each other a little better," she said briefly. She made a sort of imperious sign to Jenny, and both girls got into the car.

My temper is none too good, and after a snub like that I was feeling pretty raw myself, though no doubt I had asked for it. I'd only meant to be helpful, and if I had been a chauffeur she couldn't have treated me more off-handedly. When I had paid off the porter, my car-watcher came forward, and stuck his clenched fist under my nose as if he wished me to admire it. The knuckles were barked and raw.

"See that, sir," he said grimly.

"I done that on a dirty dog that I caught jammin' a needle into your back tyre, sir."

"What the devil for!"

"Spite, o' course; just because I got the job instead of 'im. I put him down with one on the mouth and he shot up agen and sloped off. Wouldn't stand to it. Look 'ere, sir!"

IN FULL CRY

HE pointed to a mark on the near back tyre and touched it with a wet finger. A tiny bubble rose up, showing a slow puncture that would have left the tyre flat in half an hour's travel. More annoyed than ever I took my coat off, jacked up the car, and changed the wheel with as little delay as possible.

"What's the matter?" asked Miss Corbyn, putting her head out.

"Nothing," I said shortly. And at the time I really thought it was nothing . . . just the malice of some loafer or street boy; one has had cars wantonly damaged before . . . When the change was made I gave the watcher five shillings for his barked knuckles and told him I wished he had used a spiked club.

I slipped into the driving-seat and found the little Craddock girl sitting beside me, looking rather timid and forlorn. With the piles of bags and wraps inside there was now only comfortable room for one in the back seats, and Elaine Corbyn had taken that place. When I looked round to see where she was, she remarked briefly that she disliked sitting in the front of a car and that Miss Craddock would take the forward seat. Very much as if she were telling off the lady's maid to sit with the chauffeur.

"Delighted," said I, as I let in the clutch.

This business was going wrong, from the very beginning. I had been told to make a good impression on Elaine Corbyn, and I had somehow mismanaged it so badly that I was shunted alongside the attendant while Elaine sat in state behind me and gave orders as if the whole outfit belonged to her. And I was perverse enough to be pleased about it. Though I had only known her ten minutes, there was no-

body in London I would so soon have sat beside as Jenny Craddock. It seemed to me that she shivered a little ; the night was chilly and there was a rug in front. I spread it over her knees with one hand while we swung out of the station approach.

"Are you a good driver, Mr. Rolfe?" asked Miss Corbyn from the back.

"Middling," said I.

"Can you go fast, if you have to?"

"Fast! That's the one thing I'm good at; I begin where Segrave leaves off."

With a certain irritation I spirited the car up Camden Road, past a traffic policeman and cut out two omnibuses and a lorry, leaving a good deal of language behind me, and whizzed past Swiss Cottage. Miss Corbyn said nothing, but I glanced at Jenny and noticed that her eyes were closed, maybe because she was tired; it occurred to me that my crazy driving was scaring her and I slowed to a more reasonable pace, not much caring whether it pleased my other passenger or not. It looked as if Elaine liked speed. Altogether, I was not carrying out my father's instructions at all ; in a sense I wasn't playing the game. Still, all I had contracted for was to bring these two girls home, and I was doing that.

We sailed over Child's Hill and struck the great arterial road to Welwyn twenty minutes later, leaving London behind us. The last of the raw, new suburbs faded out, the wooded country beyond was washed with a faint fairy shimmer of moonlight, the wide highway cutting through it all as straight as a race track. So far, Miss Craddock had sat beside me perfectly silent, a dainty, fragrant little presence. I glanced at her face, and felt happy and friendly.

"Your first visit to England?" I said. She nodded.

"I've never been here in my life, and never dreamed I'd have the chance. It's beautiful, anyway—what I saw of it from

the train. Quiet and peaceful. I suppose nothing ever happens here?"

"I was just wondering," said I.

"Stanways is a famous house, isn't it? Like you read about in English novels."

"I wonder if it will be anything like what you expect. It's not exactly Windsor, nor even Chatsworth."

She smiled; a childish, attractive little smile. Her shyness seemed to be falling away from her.

"You're not very much like what I expected either. But it'll have to be quite a large house, to fit you, Mr.——" she paused. "I don't quite know what I ought to call you? The Honourable Kenyon Rolfe?"

"Oh, that's never used here—except on tradesmen's letters and that sort of thing. Plain Mr. Rolfe; I'm Ken to my friends. When I was ranching in Montana the boys saw fit to call me 'British,' and it carries a long way over a plain if it's yelled out in the right key."

"So you've ranched in Montana, Mr. Rolfe?" said Elaine Corbyn's voice behind us. "By the way, is there somebody trying to get past?"

I glanced back, and slowed a little. There was a car somewhere behind us, and if there's anything I hate it is the glare of headlights at the back of me. I was enjoying the drive and she was quite welcome to go by if she was in such a hurry. But instead of doing so the car astern hung on behind in the annoying way some cars have, though there was lots of room and no other traffic in sight. So to get rid of the glare through the rear windows on my wind-screen I speeded up to an easy fifty which is fast enough to leave anything behind at night. We curved into the Great North Road and shot through Stevenage and Baldock.

But when we passed over the high downs, those powerful headlights at the back stole up and stuck to us still. That

roused me, and I asked the Chrysler for her best; the speedometer needle touched sixty-three! The other car just held us. She didn't try to pass. She eased when I eased, and speeded when I speeded, keeping always about two hundred yards astern; the situation was now clear enough.

We were being dogged.

I made quite sure. I had the advantage here, for I know every by-way in that district as well as I know the park at home. At the foot of the long hill I slowed enough to turn left and away into the Cranwell road, a long narrow gravelly highway that runs straight northward through a lonely country with a maze of lanes to either side. It was not a route that anyone would be likely to take; it was a no-man's-land to the ordinary motorist. But the car behind had watched the course of my headlights when I turned, for here she was again, as faithful as a shadow.

Instantly all the earlier events of the evening, forgotten for the while, came back to me. The spy at Stanways, the furtive attempt at blackmail; the anonymous warning at Euston. They were taking concrete shape. This big, black-looking, powerful open car behind me—it was only a vague impression I could get in a backward glance through the glare of the oncoming lights—meant business of some sort and doubtless ugly business at that.

What was his game; what did he think he could do? If he had the lead of us there were plenty of things he could do. Watch us home, or get ahead of us and hold us up. Or——

"Why are we going so fast?" murmured Jenny Craddock uneasily. Elaine Corbyn leaned forward over the seat.

"Mr. Rolfe," she said quietly, "that car behind is trailing us."

"You've noticed it?" said I. It had been pretty obvious for the last ten miles.

"I've noticed it ever since we left Euston."

"The dickens you did! Have you any idea who it is?"

"Elaine!" gasped Jenny, "do you think it's——"

"Shut up, Jenny," said Elaine briefly. No . . . I don't know who it is. But never mind talking now—please keep going!"

"I will!" said I. "Taking it all round I've a pretty valuable freight aboard. Do you think it's somebody with an eye to that black jewel-case?"

"Jewel-case! You mean the valise? Why, there are a few trinkets of mine in that——"

"A few trinkets! I should say by its weight it held half the stock in Tiffany's show window."

"Mr. Rolfe," said Elaine, "whatever they are after it isn't likely to be the jewel-case, that's all I can tell you. Can you get quit of them?"

I nodded. It was not a question of 'can'—I had got to get quit of them.

As a rule it pays better to stand than run. But with two women in the car there seemed nothing for it but to keep on. It might be that I had played into the pursuers' hands by turning off the main route, and that they had got me where they wanted me. I thought *I* had got them where I wanted them.

There was something wildly exhilarating in that rush through the night. Any moment we might find ourselves ditched or turning head over heels; but the same applied to the other fellow, and he didn't seem to mind. If we should happen to stop and make closer acquaintance, the heavy, steel lever of the car-jack was handy in its locker, and my thoughts turned to it instinctively. But I was still keeping a little of the Chrysler's speed in reserve. She was holding the rough road splendidly; the car behind had opened its exhaust cut-out, and was roaring like a devouring beast.

Apart from the commonplace risks of fast driving I could feel in my bones that there was danger, real cold-drawn

danger at the back of this mysterious chase, and I couldn't help admiring the self-possessed way in which Elaine Corbyn took it, though there was a tense note in her voice when she spoke, as though she were holding herself in. Poor little Jenny was badly shaken; she said nothing, but I could feel her trembling at my side. I felt a strong impulse to put an arm round her and tell her not to worry. But I repressed it—besides I wanted both hands for the wheel.

"Peaceful England!" I said laughing. "Nothing ever happens here." And not till then did I remember the unknown loafer at Euston whose needle had put one tyre out of action and I blessed my car-watcher and his barked knuckles; I had changed the wheel in time! If the hunters behind me wanted to make sure of a killing, they couldn't have chosen a cuter way! The advice of the immortal huntsman James Pigg flashed into my mind—"If ye want to show a kill, pop a few shot-corns into fox's hind legs, an' hounds'll soon catch him. . . ."

Was it fancy, or did the steering-wheel pull over and drag to the left, as if the other tyre was giving out on me? It seemed to me I could feel it plainly.

"They're gaining on us!" said Elaine.

I heard a click, as she pulled down the blind over the car's rear window. Simultaneously I heard something else . . . a sharp, splitting crack away behind us, a pitiful little gasp from the girl at my side, and the car lurched and swerved, swinging me violently against her.

VI

THE CHECK

I HAVE not the foggiest notion even now why the car did not turn a double somersault, but I had still one hand on the wheel and gave a sort of blind wrench that straightened her on to the road again, more by luck than judgement, as I heaved myself clear of Jenny and trod on the gas.

"Are you hurt?" I shouted.

"No!" she said huskily, and that was a bigger relief to me than finding the car right side up and still speeding. I had had the idea—from the cry she gave after that pistol-like crack away behind, that something deadly had happened to her. The idea seemed perfectly mad—but as far as I could see the night was packed full of madness; I was long past being surprised at anything.

"You're well ahead! They were nearly ditched too—keep going!" said an encouraging voice behind me.

So Elaine Corbyn was not damaged either; that was all to the good, though somehow I hadn't given it a thought when I sung out to Jenny. We had gained a little on the pursuers, but I knew it could only end one way if this went on. They had the speed of us, and though my tyre was holding out there was no getting quit of them by running. Having this freight on board the odds were too long against me if I came to a halt and a scrap with the opponents whoever they were.

There was only one card left up my sleeve and I played it. My headlights gave them a clear mark to follow. We were flying down a long slope with a useful lead of the other car, and next came a short steep rise. At the end of the straight stretch beyond, was a right-angled bend with a flimsy wooden rail and a sheer drop into a chalk-pit. We should both have to slow when we reached that. . . .

I didn't mean to reach it. One reason why I had turned into this Cranwell back-country was that I knew every acre of it, and the notion had naturally flashed up from the first moment I was sure we were being chased; I had one advantage over a hunted fox. He can't shut off his scent even when he runs to earth.

When we topped the rise of the hill and dashed along the straight, I could tell by my driving-mirror that the pursuer had not yet come up over the crest; the glare of his headlights was not visible in the reflector beside me. And I shut my lights off.

It was the biggest chance I ever took, that plunge from light into gloom, going at such a pace. If my eyes failed to focus themselves in time and enable me to steer, we should crash to a certainty. If you doubt it, shut off your own headlights, speeding at night. But it was that or nothing. There was just sufficient glimmer of moonlight to let me keep the road. Seventy yards ahead on the left was a tall ash tree and just beyond it, I knew, was the opening of a cart-track that turned to the left between blind hedges.

"Sit tight!" I shouted, shutting off the gas and braking hard. There was just space enough to reduce the speed from fifty to about fifteen before we reached the tree; I wrenched the wheel over and we dived sharp left into that blind cart-track like a rabbit diving into a furze bush, and stopped dead.

The whole move had not taken twenty seconds; if the pursuer had his lights on us before we got off the road I should have failed—but even then he would be likely to pass by, and there was no room for him to turn and swing.

I shoved my head out through the window. Here he came, racing along at full clip. Never slackening in the least, he roared by us, seeing nothing but the empty road in front of him, and with a wicked thrill of delight that shot right down

to the soles of my feet I sprang out of the car and ran back on to the road to watch.

The red tail-light of the other car was receding swiftly, the two great beams from his headlamps stretched ahead like the antennæ of an insect seeking its prey. There was barely a hundred yards before him to the bend of the road and in a moment or two I heard what I was waiting for—the squeal of brakes jammed on violently, drowned by a sharp-shattering crack, followed by a fraction of a second's pause.

Then a crash that woke the night and sent its echoes throbbing along the moonlit road, dying away into a silence that could be felt.

I stood still for a while listening. It was as satisfactory a moment as I ever had. I went back to the Chrysler, started her, and began to reverse her on to the road. Jenny Craddock preserved a sort of paralysed silence. Miss Corbyn was excitedly saying something that sounded like a round of applause, much to my surprise; but I wasn't paying any attention to her till the car swung clear.

"That's that," I said with relief, "you're sure neither of you two are hurt?"

"That car crashed didn't it?" exclaimed Elaine, "where is it?"

"Well, for a guess its in the chalk-pit at the bend," said I. "Until somebody designs one with wings, there are very few cars that will fly a chalk-pit. I shouldn't worry about it if I were you; we're not likely to have any further trouble that way."

I didn't feel that the occupants of the other car, whoever they might be, were any loss to civilisation, I have a prejudice against shooting at any time; I'm not exactly squeamish, but a fellow who shoots at a woman, even allowing that he may have excellent reasons for it, is welcome to any trouble I can put in his way. They certainly had not been after me,

though if they were I should have been just as much annoyed.

"Might have been us, you know—with a little luck," I said, "would you like me to——"

There was an interruption; a faint gasp from Jenny, who was staring ahead. And I stared too. Down at the bend a bright glow was lighting up the trees, growing brighter swiftly, till in a few seconds a column of yellow fire shot up high above the hollow, illuminating the sky with a devilish glare.

"Gosh!" I said, letting in the clutch, "her tank's flashed!"

"How awful!" gulped Jenny, trembling. "Can't you help—can't you do something!"

I was already shooting the Chrysler along towards the pit. Even the fire didn't fill me with any humanitarian sentiments; I've seen a house full of people alight, but this was different. Still, one certainly had to do something. I pulled up at the bend with a jerk and jumped out.

"Stay where you are!" I said, for it was not likely to be a pretty sight that was waiting for us in the pit.

Rescue work is all very well, but I didn't know what other work might be to hand, and I grabbed a heavy, two-foot spanner from the tool-box before I ran to the gap where the flimsy rail had been torn away, and looked down.

On the bare floor of the pit lay the car, the focus-point of a fountain of flame that was flaring upwards like a geyser. A glance was enough to show that no chance remained of getting any living thing out of that mass of wreckage.

There seemed to be nothing to get, dead or alive. The car, a big open one of semi-racing type, lay flat on its side; its long bonnet was crushed, and through the sheet of transparent yellow flame that was now sweeping it from end to end I could see there was nothing inside the body. But—was that dark shadow there something pinned underneath it?

Without a second's pause I dashed round the edge where the ground sloped and got down into the pit.

The heat was so fierce that one could not get very near. It was like facing a blast-furnace. I did my best at the cost of scorched hands and eyeballs, but I was beaten back, and what I had thought I saw from above was no longer visible. Nor did it seem possible that there was anybody beneath that flat-lying wreck; if there was, he was beyond hope.

I stepped back and looked about me quickly; the whole place was lit up like noon. I never saw anything more diabolical than that pit with its fountain of flame and its dancing black shadows. The white chalk floor was bare all around.

For all the sign there was of anything human, the car might have been driven by a ghost.

Then I caught sight of a pile of stones overshadowed by a small bush, some twenty feet away to the left. Under the bush, when I reached it, was a huddled figure, lying face downwards.

I turned him over, and found I had to do with a dead man.

VII

A PACT OF SILENCE

THE question was what to do next, and I solved that quickly. For the man himself there was nothing to be done.

The first thing one naturally does in such circumstances is to look into a man's face. But if I had ever seen him before I should not have known it—for he had no face. One does not want to go into details. There was a chunk of limestone on that rock heap into which he had evidently crashed front first. It must have been one of the quickest deaths on record; the effect on what had once been his features was beyond description.

For a guess, I should say he had been shot clear of the car when it checked at the crash through the fence above, and the impetus had thrown him many yards beyond, into the pit. One queer thing I noticed was that his soft felt hat was still on the back of his head, jammed hard on as a man would jam it when driving at high speed, and that it was hardly crumpled. But forward of the hat—nothing. I noticed he was rather small of build, and wore good quality serge clothes, and neat brown boots. But altogether I did not spend twenty seconds over him.

The next thing was a rapid search all round the place for his companions. He *must* have had somebody with him, surely. Nobody would tackle such an enterprise single-handed, nor would any man be able to drive at that pace over such roads and shoot as well—I was sure I had heard at least one shot. But nothing could I find; save for the blazing wreck and the corpse, the place seemed as empty as the tomb.

The drop into the pit was a sheer twelve feet, at the pace the car went it seemed incredible that anybody who was in

her could have got away with it. Yet people do sometimes escape more or less unhurt from the most amazing crashes. I searched hurriedly to the outer limit of the pit where the ground sloped away, covered with clumps of bushes and gorse looming darkly in the glare of the fire. It didn't seem likely anybody could have been flung so far. Just short of the cover I caught sight of what looked like fresh footmarks ploughing through the chalky soil. I followed to where they disappeared in the grass . . . the light was too bad here to let one see much.

I was just pushing ahead when I took a glance behind me and saw someone moving about the pit not far from the burning car. I turned and ran back—it was Elaine, of all people . . . she had climbed down by the slope at the side.

"Go back, for mercy's sake!" I cried as I ran, "keep away from that."

But she was already standing by the body when I arrived, looking down at it; her face was pale in the glare, and something in her expression made me blurt out.

"Do you know him?"

She shook her head—it was a fool question I had asked, his own brother wouldn't have known him.

"Is there no one else?" she asked.

"I believe so—tracks down yonder . . . you go back while I see to it."

Elaine laid a hand on my arm.

"Mr. Rolfe, I want you to take me out of this, please—at once! Will you? Let us get away from here—just as quick as we can. Let everything else go."

"Right! Get to the car, and for Mike's sake keep the other girl from leaving it—I can hear her crying out for you . . . I'll be with you in a second."

She turned and hurried up the slope again on to the road. I hesitated. What she asked of me was the common-sense

thing to do no doubt, with two girls on my hands. I hated to turn my back on it; I wanted badly to know what had become of that other man. Either he had got away, or he was hiding up—was he the man with the gun? Or maybe he had met the same fate as his mate and I'd failed to find him yet . . . he couldn't be lying injured or he would surely have sung out for help rather than be left to it. What had become of him? It was the silence and the emptiness—save for the dead thing by the bush—that shook me.

I darted along to the gorse where the tracks were, taking a grip of the spanner, and ploughed to and fro for a few moments but not a thing could I see, and Elaine was calling to me. There was no help for it. Back I went.

As I crossed the floor of the pit I stopped dead, almost stumbling upon something I had overlooked. A flat tweed cap, lying crown downwards on the chalk, not a dozen feet from the car. I was about to pick it up—but instead I passed round it and let it lie. I reached the road and slipped into the Chrysler's driving-seat. Both girls were already inside.

"Away quick, please!" said Elaine as I swung the car. "Go back by the way you came!"

There was no panic in her voice, she spoke as quietly as ever, but she had dropped that curtness of command, as though she were giving orders to a chauffeur, nor was there any appeal in her tone either, she just spoke as one good friend might to another. She was sitting beside me now, in Jenny's place; I guessed that Jenny had left the car and had been hustled back by Elaine who had relegated her to the rear seat.

"Elaine!" she cried breathlessly from the place among the baggage as we sped along the sandy road, "are you sure—are you *sure*—it's all right . . . ?"

"Well, I think he got clear away," said I; it came home to me pretty quick that Elaine had said nothing to her about

the dead man in the pit and I was right, for I felt an approving nudge of Elaine's elbow against my arm. I felt glad enough for the poor child to be spared any knowledge of it for as long as might be, after what she had been through; she was very far from being as tough stuff as her chief.

"And don't you worry," I added, "you're in no sort of danger now, and we'll clear up this trouble for you."

I was feeling a good deal bewildered myself, and there was silence till I had laid a couple of rapid miles between me and the flare in the pit. I felt too that Elaine knew a lot more about this business than I did, but she seemed tongue-tied. But now that the tension was eased she turned to me.

"The way you handled that job was fine, Mr. Rolfe," she said warmly, "it was a time for quick thinking, and I never saw anything quicker. You're a man one can rely on."

I grew hot under the collar, and felt rather a fool. What I had done was only the obvious thing to do, and we had had a lot of luck with us. In a sense the crashing of the car and its crew was my doing, but the last thing I had expected was to have bouquets handed me by Elaine. It was pleasant enough, but it was telling me nothing.

"The question is, what you're going to do next——"

"There's one sure thing we've got to do, now we're away," I said, stopping the car under a hedge and jumping out, "that tyre's gone flat on us at last."

I had no second spare wheel, but a powerful foot-pump that would give us wind enough to beat a slow puncture and get us home with the least delay possible. I got it to work and was pumping busily when Elaine slipped out of the car and came beside me.

"Where are you going to make for?" she asked.

"Hertford or home . . . soon as you're out of the way I'll report and get things moving. The quicker that's done the better."

"Will you do something for me?"

"Sure."

"Take me to Stanways, Mr. Rolfe—and leave it at that. Whoever wishes to move in it, let them move ! I don't want it reported. I'd like you—for the present anyway—to keep all this to yourself, and forget it. I don't want anything done at all—please."

I took my foot off the pump and stared at her in amazement. I couldn't believe she was serious.

"Of course if you don't agree I can't insist," she said quickly, "but you'll be helping me if you say nothing."

I looked back at the distant flare against the sky—it seemed such a long way off now—and thought of the dead man in the pit. But nothing, so far, had surprised me as much as this. It seemed incredible that she could mean it.

Here in England, anyway, my instinctive, thickheaded British bias on the side of law and custom surged up against the idea. And yet I'm not bigoted. I wasn't in the least worried as to what had happened to those two thugs in the car. And if she wanted this thing kept quiet, she must have very strong reasons for it.

It flashed into my mind that my own part in the affair from the start . . . the scene with my father . . . the spying by Linke . . . Elaine's status as a guest at Stanways. . . to say nothing of this amazing drive—didn't exactly shout for publicity. And once the police start sorting things out you never know where you are. Besides, when a woman asks you not to give anything away, what else is there to be done?

"If you say so," said I, "but doesn't it strike you this is going to be a bit dangerous?"

"It's the least dangerous way—for me. And I promise you that if it comes up against you at all, I'll see you clear."

"I wasn't thinking of myself. You can cut that out—don't worry about me, I'd lose no sleep over it. Mum's the word then. It's your show, and your decision."

I heard an audible sigh of relief from her.

"That's fine of you," she said gratefully, "you'd rather have gone straight ahead with it, wouldn't you?"

"Well—I don't usually let people shoot at me without taking steps about it. But——"

"Shoot?" she exclaimed, "what do you mean?—they didn't shoot——"

"Oh come!" I said. "D'you think I don't know a pistol shot when I hear one . . . just before I turned the car."

She shook her head.

"I should think what you heard was a back-fire. I'd have noticed it if they had shot at us—I was watching through the back window, just before pulling the blind over it."

She might be right. She must have thought so for I didn't see why she should try to fool me over a matter like that. She hesitated a moment, and then said:

"You think I ought to tell you more about it . . . there are plenty of questions you'd like to ask me, aren't there? It's going to be safer, for all of us, if I say nothing yet."

"That's just as you please," said I, "but if you're in any sort of trouble or danger, and you care to tell me, maybe I could help."

"Yes," she said, "I'm in some sort of trouble—or danger. Will you believe me when I tell you that even now I don't know finally what it is, or what may come of it. It's something I can't talk about to—anyone. This may be the end of it all . . . I hope so. I can say or do nothing, till I know more than I do now. Later maybe, I'll tell you; if you care to hear. For the time, do you mind if I keep it to myself and ask you to do the same?"

"Certainly," said I. "The door's shut and the key lost, so far as I'm concerned."

She murmured something that I didn't catch, and slipped back into the car. I blew the tyre hard, jumped in, and was buzzing along the road again, when Elaine called back to her companion.

"Remember what I've told you, Jenny. If you're asked, we ran straight through to Stanways, only stopping to change a wheel."

"It's asking me to tell a lie," said Jenny huskily.

"Yes dear," said Elaine. "Most of us have to lie sometimes. I heard you say once that you wished you had a dollar for every lie you've told. You'd be a capitalist—you'd make my little pile look like thirty cents. You might switch off all lights, Mr. Rolfe, so that nobody who happens to be about will see this car turn on to the main road again or remember afterwards what time she struck it."

I was going to do that in any case; I was already driving with the little side-lights only, but I switched even those off and crept back on to the Great North Road in darkness, not showing my lamps till I was well away on the route.

"Of course," she said under her breath, "if anyone hunts around to-morrow, back there, they'll see your tyre-marks where you took the cart-road by the chalk-pit and reversed out again. There'll be no trailing us any farther now we've hit the asphalt. I should say it will puzzle anybody to identify that wreck any more than its driver—by the way it was blazing it will be fused into scrap-iron."

"Yes," said I, "and you should clean every trace of chalk off your shoes Miss Corbyn; see to it yourself before anybody else handles them at home. Meanwhile scrub them well on the mat that's under your feet here, so they don't carry the stuff out. The car, I'll attend to."

She nodded.

"You've a head on your shoulders, Mr. Ken Rolfe," she said as we shot off for home at full speed, "you'll do."

Her manner had altered altogether since we got away from the trouble. One couldn't help liking her. But somehow the change didn't elate me as it ought to have done. I was regretting all the time that she had changed places with Jenny, who was sitting at the back of the car as silent as a scared mouse.

My thoughts went back for the last time to that pit with its dancing shadows, the unexplained disappearance, the knowledge that a corpse lay there with the smashed head that it had asked for . . . maybe there were two, but I doubted it. And now that the flare was far out of sight it seemed as unreal as a dream: I could scarcely believe it ever happened. To me by far the most amazing aspect was the coolness with which this self-possessed young woman met the whole thing and took charge of it.

I supposed it was the command of money that gave her such unlimited assurance. The back tyre held out, though it was dead just as I pulled up before the porch of Stanways, uncommonly glad to get there.

VIII

THE HOME-COMING

THE maid-servant opened the great doors for us and took charge of the baggage in the car while I walked behind the two girls into the vast emptiness of the hall. It wasn't a very impressive entry, but my father made up for it.

He was waiting for us in the library and he came forward at once to greet Elaine, who was leading the party. I couldn't help feeling proud of the old man—not for the first time. He was extraordinarily distinguished; Dad, in his evening kit, does look a thoroughbred right down to his fetlocks, and there is a charm in that smile of his that would wile a bird off a tree. I could see that Elaine took to him at first sight. He gave her both his hands, as if he were a prince welcoming home a long-lost member of the family, and it was just right—not overdone in the least.

"Stanways is yours, Miss Corbyn," he said, "we're going to make the dull old place just as pleasant as we can for you."

"That's nice of you, Lord Trent; I've a feeling I'm going to have the time of my life here," said Elaine. "I've had all the travelling I want for some time to come."

"A comfortable drive down—no delay?" he asked.

Miss Corbyn nodded with that quiet little smile of hers.

"Yes, I can give your son a diploma for good driving."

"So glad. I'm fond of Ken, he is all I've got, but I shouldn't think much of him if he couldn't do a little thing like that," said Dad, laying a hand affectionately on my shoulder. Elaine turned as if by an afterthought to present Jenny, who was standing timorously in the background. He seemed to wonder why she hadn't done it before.

"My friend, Miss Craddock," she said briefly. "Jenny, meet Lord Trent."

My father never misses any detail of a woman's appearance, especially a pretty woman, and he is an uncommonly good judge. He had already, I guessed, formed his own opinion of Jenny Craddock's looks, that wistful childish charm of hers, her dowdy travelling clothes and her obviously subordinate position to Elaine; her consciousness of it too. His reception of her was just as cordial and friendly; it was so well done that I saw her flush a little with pleasure.

But I, who knew him so well, felt that there was a difference; for some reason she did not suit him, he would have been considerably better pleased if Elaine had arrived alone, or at least had brought anybody with her except Jenny Craddock. There came to me at that moment something I had never felt before; a resentment and a hostility to my father. It was as if we were on opposite sides of a barrier.

"We're going to be friends Miss Craddock, are we not?" he said. "Why—what's this?"

Elaine had handed him an envelope.

"I thought I'd give you this right away," she said, "it's my letter of introduction from your agent in New York."

"Oh, that doesn't matter Miss Corbyn," he said smiling, and tossed it carelessly on the table; he seemed rather embarrassed at her directness. "And now—you'd like to go up to your quarters wouldn't you—after a trying journey." He pressed the bell. "Supper whenever you are ready—I hope you'll like your rooms, they are side by side, my housekeeper will show you to them. She's very capable. Whatever you want done, tell her and she'll do it."

"I've heard of the old English housekeeper; I guess she'll suit this wonderful old place of yours," said Elaine, looking curiously round the vast, shabby room. "It's like reading *Bracebridge Hall*." She paused a moment. "You don't keep men-servants, Lord Trent?"

"I've found men-servants unsatisfactory. The old, reliable

breed is dying out," said my father, and just then the house-keeper came in, regulation pattern, billowing in black silk and beads. It always beat me how anyone could look so like a peer's housekeeper as Mrs. Jessop did. She dropped a little curtsey to Elaine, taking no particular notice of Jenny, and took the two girls upstairs. As soon as we were alone my father turned to me.

"Ken, what do you think of Miss Corbyn?"

"I think that if you expect to get the better of that girl and her bank account Dad, you've got another guess coming."

"You think that?" But he said complacently, "But who ever supposed I expected anything of the sort, I find her charming. And I can see that you like her."

"Like her! Well—there's a good deal in her to admire."

"Not a bad beginning," he said smiling. "And you've made an excellent impression on her—better than you know."

I closed the door.

"Look here, sir," I said, "you had better tell me now, just what you know about Miss Corbyn."

"I've already told you that I know nothing," he replied, opening the letter she had given him and glancing at it.

That decided me. If he was going to keep his own counsel, I would keep mine. He chose to play his own hand, and not a word would he get out of me upon anything that had happened.

"All right sir, if you say so. You know nothing of her—nor even whether she is Elaine Corbyn at all, and not an imposter."

"Don't be absurd Ken," he said putting the letter and a couple of enclosures into his pocket-book; I thought I caught sight of a cheque. "That is the one thing you can take as final. Did she tell you much about herself, on the road—did anything unusual happen?"

I looked at him quickly.

"She did not," I said. "And anything that does happen, she'll prefer I should keep it to myself—you may as well remember that."

"Quite right," he said, "when a woman, and a guest into the bargain wants any sort of a secret to be respected, surely one can do no less. In these days my boy, never try to dip too deeply into any girl's past—any more than you would wish her to enquire into yours. Then you've nothing to tell me?"

"One thing, and then I've done," said I. "Do you know that discharged flunkey of yours, Linke, tried to blackmail me before I left the house?"

"An ugly word, blackmail," said my father, "one of the most unpleasant words I know."

"It's an ugly thing."

"Very. I suppose that was the reason of the scuffle I heard under my window—a noise as of something soft being violently hit. It was natural, but rather crude of you, Ken."

"I'm apt to be crude if people try that sort of thing on me. You didn't, I suppose, hear what he said to me?"

I told him in a few words. My father listened as if it were something of no importance, and shrugged his shoulders.

"A creature of that sort will try to make money out of anything. It really can't matter seriously. I believe Ken—you will not see any more of Linke."

"Shan't I? I'm rather hoping that I shall," I said, and made for the door abruptly.

"Forget it, and devote yourself to making our guest feel at home... a very pleasant duty. And by the way, Ken," he added warningly. "That little companion—Miss Craddock——"

I stopped.

"A contrast in every way to her employer. They don't seem to get on very well; rather curious she should have brought her here. A pretty child, don't you think. But——"

"What about her!" I said curtly, turning to him.

"Nothing, Ken."

I went out, seething with annoyance. There is a power, a sort of driving force in my father, quiet as he is, that one can't help recognising. I have never met the person, however obstinate or cunning, who could baulk him in the long run, when he was set on anything. But for the present I had more than I could stand, I ran the car down into the garage, ignoring the flattened tyre, and incidentally looked her over for a bullet mark. I found what looked like a groove in the side of the saloon body, but even then could not be certain what it was.

Only one thing I felt sure of in all this puzzling business—before long there would be the devil to pay. Who, I wondered, would have to meet the bill? Probably me.

IX

MR. GORDON CRIEFF

HALF an hour later we were all at supper in the old dining-hall, and I never saw anything like the way those two girls brightened up and looked happy and comfortable and at ease, before it was half over. Stanways might have been home to them. It was my father's doing and not mine; he has the social gift as very few men have it. It's a thing you can't explain or put into words. I felt it myself, and it seemed to me as if the rough stuff we had been through that evening had never happened at all. We were all cosy and cheery together, amid lights and laughter, crystal and flowers. Elaine got on amazingly with Dad, and seemed impressed by him, though I couldn't believe the idea that he was Trent of Denham really cut any ice with her at all, and her attitude still baffled me. But she was intensely interested in him, and in the house, and in everything about her.

"I think this old place of yours is just wonderful, Lord Trent," she said as we went into the hall for coffee, where a great fire of logs was blazing on the hearth. "I'm going to get your son to show me every secret it has, and explain it to me."

"Ken doesn't value it as he should—he hasn't the historic sense," said Dad. "But you have got it, Elaine—I'm going to call you Elaine. Surnames are much too formal between host and guests," he added smiling. "It falls in with our little arrangement you know—anything else would look queer before strangers."

Elaine laughed.

"Certainly I'm Elaine to my friends," she said. "How many children have you, Lord Trent?"

"Only Ken, but he's a host in himself. Yes—he'll have the

place some day; a pity, isn't it. And I haven't been feeling very fit lately. But I shall keep him out of it as long as I can."

"I certainly would!" said Elaine. She was wandering round the room, inspecting the pictures ranged on the panelled walls, portraits of bygone Rolfes. They were an imposing show. Dad had not yet been able to raise anything on them as they were heirlooms. Why, I don't know, for I believe most of them were copies; the originals had been sold at Christies by a predecessor.

"Are those family portraits?" said Jenny Craddock to me. "That one with the lace ruffles and the side-locks down over his shoulders might be yourself in fancy dress," she laughed, and added, "I've never seen such a likeness."

"I hope not," said I, "that's Carteret Rolfe the Cavalier; the biggest ruffian of his period. The old boy in blue on the quarter-deck leaning on his sword with the Rock of Gibraltar behind him is Admiral Rolfe, one of Nelson's crowd. He's looking down his nose as if he hated the sight of me and didn't think much of his descendant."

Elaine interrupted. She had pulled from a shelf a big red book which was evidently new to her: *Burke's Peerage*. It's no favourite of mine, the sight of that fat, gilded volume always galls me—perhaps because it's an absurdity to a man without a cent of his own. It opened naturally at the page "TRENT OF DENHAM," with a sprawling picture of the arms, two griffins clawing at a shield that displays three spurrowels in chief and a decapitated head, '*guttee de sang*,' which means 'spotted with blood'; and the crest, a broken tilting-spear.

"Why, Lord Trent, this is some record!" she exclaimed, "you're entered up here just like a prize dog in the Kennel Club book! . . . Mervyn Stanley Charles; 14th Baron, created 1326. Then your name's Mervyn?"

"No. That was my cousin; the book's out of date."

"I see. There's enough blood in this picture to satisfy a

Chinese hatchet-man. Motto, 'Thou shalt want ere I want.' That's frank, anyway. 'Lineage . . . Hugo Rolfe, in 1134 . . .' —Why, I've traced a duke in your line! You're the Duke of Axminster's family."

Dad chuckled.

"Pardon me, dear lady—the Duke of Axminster is of my family. We're the senior branch; and Axminster is nearly as broke as I am."

The two girls were deep in the book, as interested as children, and just then the door opened quietly and the housekeeper appeared, looking so agitated that I saw there was something seriously wrong. My father came across, and as he joined her just outside I heard her whisper:

"My lord, there is a person in the breakfast-room—I don't know who he is or how he got into the house; he says he must see you at once. And there's another man down in the servants' hall——"

The door closed behind them and I was left to look after Elaine, who did not seem to have noticed the interruption. I continued talking to the girls, though feeling uneasy, and in a few moments I heard a disturbance, and voices raised in high dispute. There certainly was trouble. I got away as unobtrusively as I could, passing through the lobby opposite where a swing-door opened into the morning-room

I found my father standing by the table, on which lay an unfolded document close to his hand. It seemed to me he was looking ten years older. He was facing a large stout man who glared at him aggressively; a man with a dark, perspiring face, a pair of fierce, keen eyes, and a hooked nose.

"Made an error, have I?" he cried, "By heck! You've made the biggest error of your life. You——"

"Will you lower your voice, Mr. Crieff?" said my father quietly, "I don't care to be shouted at in my own house."

The intruder moved nearer to him, menacingly.

"I'm to choose the tone I speak to you in, am I? *Your* house—I like that! By heck, that's good!"

For a moment I felt a sense of relief, which turned quickly to wrath. I had rather expected to find the police on deck; but I knew this man, Gordon Crieff—I had seen him before. What his business was I didn't exactly know, but his manner roused my temper, my hands itched to put him out through the window; I glanced at my father, but a warning flicker of his eyes stopped me.

"You have a bailiff in my kitchen, and this is your writ, Mr. Crieff," said Dad; "to begin with, you can neither install a bailiff nor serve a writ after six o'clock——"

The fellow laughed unpleasantly.

"Can't I! I know what I can do! Don't you try and bluff *me*. I've got you—like that." He opened his big hand and clenched the fingers slowly together. "I get in while the getting's good; see that bit of paper? Five hundred pounds to that! Writ? I'll serve you a copy in the morning, if that's all.

"My man stays in possession, and so do I! *You* can't kick. You'd like to throw me out—you can't do it. Why?"

He flipped an envelope from his pocket, and took from it a cheque which he opened and showed to Dad, holding it up—well out of reach.

"Take a look at it! *Your cheque*. Two hundred and fifty pounds; made out to me. For money received, mark you. And turned down at the Bank—dishonoured." He craned his neck forward. "You get what that means? False pretences—fraud! Your arrest's only waiting for a word from me—and you'll get it in the morning."

I saw Dad's eyelids droop a little, he said nothing.

It was not the pleasantest moment of my life. Gordon Crieff glanced at me, and looked away again as if I were of no account. He was right. There was nothing I could do; the simple methods that I generally use for emergencies were of no use here.

"What you want, Mr. Crieff," said my father calmly, "is money. It's what you've always wanted. You couldn't have chosen a worse moment than this to make trouble. If you had given me time——"

"Time!" jeered Crieff. "I'll show you the sort of 'time' you'll get. Tot up the score; five hundred and the two-fifty doubled, call it an even thousand——"

"It's utterly impossible, now," said my father. "You might as well ask me for the National Debt."

"Yes, for all there is in this place to pay it . . . everything here is hocked already—think I don't know that? But you can raise it! You've got your own ways of doing it—you can always raise the stuff if you're cornered." He pointed a thick, accusing forefinger at Dad. "You've twenty-four hours to do it in, while I sit on the bolt-hole! See?"

"You should be a judge of what a man will do when he is cornered," said my father quietly. "You have got me, as you say, but I know the futility of arguing with such blood-suckers as you, Mr. Crieff. I would as soon make terms with a horse-leech."

The man exploded. I never saw anyone in such a fury. He struck the table with his fist.

"You would? It's Hertford Jail for you, and that suits me all the way!" he shouted, "you——"

The door opened, and Elaine came in, with Jenny behind her. She stopped short as Crieff turned to her.

"Oh come in, all of you!" he cried. "You're welcome—this is where——"

"Stop!" said my father, his face grey and drawn, "not before my guest. Miss Corbyn, this is private——"

"Private nothing!" snarled Crieff, "I've done with privacy." He faced Elaine who stood petrified. "Here madam, if you are his guest—do you know who this man is that calls himself 'Lord Trent'? A crook and swindler!"

X

HARD BARGAINING

THERE are times when the presence of women makes things horribly difficult for a man. I got a glimpse of Jenny Craddock's white, startled face behind the taller form of Elaine, who looked wonderingly at Crieff and then turned and went out without a word.

Following the click of the swing-door there was a tense silence for several seconds. A bomb-shell of this kind is apt to paralyse even a quick thinker, and I don't know that I am ever that. In fact I was past thinking at all. Gordon Crieff was paying attention to me for the first time, and as I moved over to him he faced me and stepped back, turning a sickly green colour; the glare died out of his eyes.

"Now they've gone," said I, "I'll take a hand."

"Leave the man alone, Ken!" said my father, "there's nothing you can do."

The door opened again as he was speaking and Elaine Corbyn came in alone, and just as self-possessed as ever. I had thought we had done with her and I could have sworn aloud.

"I don't know that this is exactly my business," she said, "but as I've been pulled into it I think I ought to hear a little more." She turned to Crieff.

"You say, 'This man who calls himself Lord Trent.' Do you mean that he is *not* Lord Trent?"

"He may be the devil for what I care?" growled Crieff. "He's in my debt but that's not all; he's swindled me and defrauded me, and insulted me!"

"But weren't you a little insulting yourself?" She looked at my father, who had sunk into a chair by the table and dropped his chin in his hand; he did not meet her eyes. It was impossible for anybody not to feel sorry for him, even one

who was not his son. "There are two sides to every case, but of course if you'd rather have me withdraw at once, I will."

"If you're his guest, madam, my tip to you is to get out of this place before something happens that you won't fancy!" said Crieff. It surprised me more than ever that a man of his profession should have such a slender control of his temper. "Gordon Crieff is my name, and aside from my having an execution on this house for five hundred, here's his cheque for two-fifty dishonoured on a deal that means just plain fraud and arrest by the police; they come right in and that's the one thing you can bet on!"

"Well, Mr. Crieff, I don't know that I admire your way of doing business, since you've dragged me into it," said Elaine. "Then Lord Trent owes you, in all——?"

"A round thousand," replied Crieff grimly, "and he can no more pay it than he could buy the Crown Jewels—according to him. It looks as if he's right there. He's the only man that's ever been able to do me down."

Miss Corbyn looked enquiringly at my father.

"I can't deny this debt," he said slowly. "It is true Mr. Crieff has judgement and execution against me for five hundred pounds. And against a later advance, he has a cheque for two-fifty—which has not been met. I was badly cornered, pressed for money, and I contracted the debt. I thought I should be able to meet it. But I can't."

He raised his head wearily.

"Since I've told you that, Miss Corbyn, there's just one thing more I'll ask you to believe. All I have had out of it, first and last, is two hundred pounds."

"Well, I do believe that," she said, her eyes on his face. "May I take a glance at this paper?"

She picked up the writ from the table and scanned it. "Yes, that doesn't need any effort to believe," she said, and turned to Crieff.

"I'll pay this debt myself."

"You'll—what!" gasped Crieff.

He rose from his chair. I saw him look at my father, just the fleetest glance, and he faced Elaine.

"Why—what is it to you, madam? You——"

"Never mind what it is to me; you know nothing about me."

"Well, this beats the band!" said Crieff. "What—look here, wait a bit, I don't know that this suits me. I don't say I'll accept a settlement from you——"

"What you want is money," returned Elaine, rising, "and you're going to get it—from me."

She left the room abruptly. There was silence for several moments after she had gone. Crieff gave a short, expressive whistle between his teeth, and sat down again. My father looked at the swinging door with a dazed expression on his face.

As for me, Elaine's offer simply knocked me endways. It was great of her, of course. I suppose I ought to have been glad of any proposal that put my honoured parent out of reach of the law. But the situation was perfectly ghastly.

"See here, sir," I said under my breath, "we can't let her do this—there *must* be some other way out of the business."

"Ken," he murmured, "I never dreamed of this . . . but my boy, what can I do?"

"Listen," broke in Mr. Crieff sardonically, "lemme tell you something——"

"Let me tell *you* something," I said, turning on him, "if you say another word you oily porch-climbing gangster, you crawling hook-worm, I'll kill you!"

All the creature did was to gape blankly at me, like a stranded fish, and Elaine returned just then as cool and businesslike as ever, with a cheque-book and a wad of notes in one hand. I suddenly felt helpless, a moment before

I would have broken Mr. Gordon Crieff's neck and accepted the consequences with pleasure. I made for the door, unable to bear any more.

"Don't go, Mr. Rolfe," said Elaine, "I shall want your help." She seated herself at the table, and produced a little gold fountain-pen.

"Now Mr. Crieff, if that's your name, draw up a quittance to Lord Trent for the entire debt; if not I'll do it for you," she said, lifting a sheet of paper out of the stand beside her. "Here are two hundred and fifty pounds in English bank-notes, covering Lord Trent's cheque that you've got there, and which you'll return to me. For the balance you will have to take my open draft on the London branch of the Guarantee Trust; you can receipt it 'paid by cheque'."

"Why will I!" returned Crieff, "I don't have to accept your draft or anybody's—it's not currency!"

"I'll show you why you will," said Elaine, and she drew up on the paper a formal discharge which was brief enough, for it did not take six lines. She pushed it across to Crieff with the notes and a cheque that she tore out of her book. He glanced at the form with knitted brows.

"Five hundred pounds?" he exclaimed indignantly, "forget it! A cold thousand."

Elaine paused.

"You won't take less?"

"Not a brass cent! I'll have my due."

"But if Lord Trent has had only two hundred? Do you deny that?"

"You're taking his word for what he's had!" snapped Crieff. "Look at the writ—judgement for five hundred, and that includes interest and costs. He didn't even defend it."

"Maybe he couldn't. I'm defending him. I think two-fifty ought to be enough on the writ."

"Think again!"

"I have thought, Mr. Crieff. Then there's two-fifty more for the dishonoured cheque; how does that make up a thousand? As I'm paying you, I ought to know."

"Doubled," said Crieff briefly. "*He* knows why!"

Elaine turned to my father.

"Mr. Crieff claims five hundred from you on that cheque?"

"Yes, Miss Corbyn."

"Under the threat that if you didn't raise it—which he must have thought you could—he would prosecute you for fraud?"

My father nodded, staring dumbly at the carpet.

"I heard him. Of course, you were in a very awkward position, Lord Trent. Now he has repeated it before me—because I'm going to pay. We've three witnesses. Mr. Rolfe, ring up your local police headquarters. Tell them to send round here at once and arrest Gordon Crieff for blackmail."

A spasm of inward laughter shook me. This girl was great. I slipped across to the telephone and shot an emergency police call through to Wheatbridge. The veins swelled on Crieff's thick neck and he started up from his chair.

"What in thunder do you mean?" he exclaimed, "why——"

"Sit down, you!" snapped out Elaine. "Mr. Rolfe, I can rely on you to keep this man in the room till the police arrive?"

"You can rely on just that little thing!" said I, as the call came through.

"By heck, you're crazy!" gasped Crieff, "you can't——"

"Mr. Crieff, I'm not an expert on English law, but American law's based on it and the same rule holds everywhere," said Elaine. "If you demand money from a man on the threat of a criminal charge and hold it up against him

till he pays, that's blackmail, and blackmail's felony. You know that as well as I do. It doesn't matter a cent whether you're a creditor or not. Lord Trent can't call your hand; but I can—and do. Get on with it, Mr. Rolfe."

"Hello—station!" I said. "The Inspector on duty, please."

"Blackmailers are not too popular, these days," said Elaine, rising, "they get it in the neck; the victim gets protection. We'll have *you* in the cells right away, and you can direct your prosecution from there. Hurry them, Mr. Rolfe, please; they've a car handy, I guess."

"Here wait—stop!" said Crieff, the perspiration breaking out on his forehead and I saw his big white hands trembling.

"Hold the line," said Elaine quietly. "Now Mr. Crieff, if you've any wish to remain a free man to-night . . . a full quittance of that debt. Here's your five hundred. I could cut it down to two, but I hold by my contracts. Decide quick! I'd prefer the police myself, its simpler and cheaper."

"Gimmel!" said Gordon Crieff huskily, and signed at the foot of the document. "Hang up that damned telephone!"

"Ring off," said Elaine to me. She laid the notes before her. I saw her signature, Elaine Corbyn, in a fine clear hand on the bank draft. She took the signed paper from him, witnessed it, handed it to me to do the same, and passed it to my father, who took it dazedly.

"Give me Lord Trent's cheque!" she said to Crieff, who hesitated a moment, glanced at her face, and tossed the cheque across to her as if it burned him. She inspected it carefully, and folded it small. She turned again to Crieff, who had stuffed the papers into his pocket shakily and stood silent, his face moist and pulpy.

"That saved you two years in the jug," she said. "Mr. Rolfe, if I were you I would put this gentleman out of Stanways—gently. We've done with him."

XI

SHADOWS OF THE NIGHT

I OPENED the door, and Gordon Crieff took a last look at us and passed out, like a man in a dream. When we were outside he seemed about to speak. I stopped him with a grip on his arm.

"Crieff," I said, "you have a friend in the house somewhere—he goes with you. Sing out for him and save time."

"Hyams!" called out Crieff huskily, and then with a shriek as I squeezed his arm a little tighter, "Hyams!"

"Yes, guv'nor," said a voice, and a dark, shabby-looking man came out of the passage to the servants' hall, shambling like a bear.

"We're leaving, Hyams—all settled," gulped Crieff. The bailiff made no comment; he evidently took in the situation and I think he was glad to go, for when I opened the front doors he hurried out in front of his chief.

"Good night, Crieff," I said, and shot him down the steps. I had an almost overpowering impulse to lift my foot to him, but it didn't seem worth while and I refrained. I saw the two of them disappear into the night, closed the doors, and went back to the morning-room.

I was not feeling triumphant; my emotions were of the most mingled kind, in fact I liked the look of things less than ever. I found my father holding both Elaine's hands in his; if there were no tears in his eyes there ought to have been.

"My dear lady!" he said, "you have been wonderful. On my honour, everything shall be returned to you in full. . . . How can I possibly thank you for the way you came to the rescue of a man whose case was so hopeless——"

"Why, don't thank me, there's no need," said Elaine quietly. "Yes . . . I'm staying on. Sure, for the present any-

way. I didn't fancy taking my orders to leave at Mr. Crieff's hands. Let it stand at that, Lord Trent. Now I think I'll go to my room. I'm a little tired."

She nodded to me, and withdrew. When she had gone my father drew a deep breath, and lit one of his excellent cigars. His hand was a little unsteady.

"Ken," he said, "that girl has a heart of gold."

"Yes," said I, "and a big gold bank balance. Did that oily fellow with the loud voice know the size of it, when he sneaked in here to-night?"

My father looked at me from under his eyebrows.

"What on earth do you mean, Ken?" he said slowly.

I had to say it. The idea had been growing in my mind for some time and was now a conviction; I couldn't keep it to myself. That this business had been stage-managed; a clever confidence trick—perhaps not so clever after all, rather sharp and desperate. A mere killing, even if deliberate, seemed a little thing in comparison with this. I was feeling perfectly sick, hating Stanways, and myself, and everyone about me.

It had cost the girl a cold five hundred, anyway. But how could a man put such a thing to his father.

"I mean that Crieff didn't make much of a price on the division," I said grimly. "He was knocked down fifty per cent, and pretty smartly too."

"Ken, do you really suggest I arranged this thing with the man Crieff," he said gently. "If so you are—mistaken."

I looked at him for a moment.

"All right, sir," I said. "If you say so, of course I believe you."

Dad sighed.

"I should hope so! And I wish you wouldn't call me 'sir,' Ken; it's so old-fashioned, it stifles the confidence that ought to flourish between father and son. My boy, I wouldn't have

that cold, suspicious mind of yours for anything. I admit I made a bad mistake, as a man is apt to when he's hard pressed. A foolish thing to do; I had let myself get into that man's power, and could see no way out of it."

"Yes," said I, "and now you're in Elaine Corbyn's."

I went up to my room, glad to get away. As soon as I was undressed and into pyjamas I switched out the light and sat on the sill of the open window, reviewing the events of that amazing evening, trying to straighten them out in my mind.

Why had she come to the rescue? The money, no doubt, wasn't so much, to a woman as wealthy as she. But why? Was it just a generous gesture, a natural touch of sympathy for one who was down and out? Had she a reason of her own for not wishing to leave Stanways, strong enough to make the price worth while? Or was it a bid for silence?

Crieff's advent, unpleasant though it had been for all of us, seemed to me less important anyway than the things that had gone before. I couldn't make them fit together; I had not yet got hold of the thread. I watched the moon slowly sinking over the cedars in the park, and wondered what sort of a scene it shone upon now, back there in the Cranwell chalk-pit, where we had left the dead man. The fire must have died down long since. Had it attracted investigators to the spot, and were they poking about now among the wreckage?

Somehow I didn't care much what happened there. Let come of it what might. Away to the left, in the west wing of the house, the lights were still burning behind the blinds in Elaine Corbyn's big three-windowed room. The little room beyond—Jenny Craddock's—was lit too, but as I watched it suddenly darkened. Elaine's light remained.

A remarkable woman, Elaine. Well able to look after herself: she didn't rouse the protective instinct. Yet she must have roused it in someone, else what did that warning

message mean at Euston, which had seemed to me only food for laughter at the time? Should I put it to her; or keep it to myself? I was not admitted to her confidence.

One thing I was very sure I would never mention to her, and that was the affair of Linke.

I had almost forgotten Linke. The little casual black-mailer had seemed of small importance. But now, to me, he suddenly loomed bigger than anybody else, in the light of what had happened since. There must be more to him than I guessed; he was probably the key to the mystery. I felt assured I hadn't done with Linke. And whatever else he might know or not know, the remembrance of what he had overheard in the library when my father was propounding his plans for Elaine, made me more bitter than ever. It was purely a personal feeling. There was doubtless much more in Linke's ugly little mind than that. I stared out of the window, busy with speculation.

I could see the back-entrance steps, where I had encountered Linke, shining white in the gloom. I wished I had kicked him harder. A kick that would land him on the far side of the Styx was indicated.

The night seemed full of ghosts and shadows. I could have sworn I saw a figure moving furtively among the dark laurels on the lawn between Elaine's window and mine, and heard the rustle of leaves. I drew back, and watched, but not for long. It was only a stirring of the night wind, and a vision bred of this atmosphere of mystery that was stifling me. Dog tired and full of disgust I threw myself on the bed, feeling that Stanways might be burned to the ground with its occupants for all I cared, and the best thing that could happen to it. If that started, there was only one person I should feel interested in rescuing. I would make a bee-line for Jenny Craddock. And so I fell asleep. . . .

A feverish, restless sleep it was, misted by queer dreams

and dream-people, of whom only one stood out vividly—Linke. He was sitting over me, grinning, his white face now small, now swelling gigantically; sometimes savage and menacing, sometimes cunning and friendly and detestable. His hands were enormous, with fingers like the hairy limbs of a titanic spider, twiddling and quivering.

"You used your foot to me," said the dream-voice, in the intervals of demanding incredible sums of money, and I saw the shadow of a policeman's helmet loom behind him, "there's a rope waiting for somebody before its finished. You look out for *her*. I can give you the winner, but you've got to get together with me. If you don't——"

Then I got my hands round his neck, trying to choke the life out of him; but my fingers were inert and refused action, with that maddening helplessness we all know in dreams. And as I held him, his eyes closed, his jaw dropped, I heard a rending noise like the crack of a whip, my hands were red with blood—I awoke and lay shaking and perspiring. So real was the noise that my head still seemed to ring with it.

The room was dark and quiet; no sound but the derisive hoot of an owl among the cedars outside.

XII

INSPECTOR BEGBIE

I SUPPOSE I must have dozed off again without knowing it, for the next thing I was aware of was the sun flooding the room, and the chimes of the stable clock striking nine. I bathed and dressed hurriedly, and went down.

Everything looked pleasant and commonplace in the morning light. The scent of curry and fish and bacon stung the nostrils pleasantly, a parlourmaid was ranging hot dishes along the side table in the breakfast-room but there was no one else in sight. There seldom is at that hour, in a country house.

"Miss Corbyn breakfasting upstairs?" I asked.

"The young lady, sir? She hasn't come back yet," said the maid.

"Come back?"

"She came down very early, sir, before seven, and went away in a car."

I remembered not to show any surprise, though I was feeling only half awake.

"Oh, yes," I said, "our car?"

"No, sir. I think she rang up the Wheatbridge garage as soon as she could make the exchange hear. They sent a car round just after seven, and she left in that. She told me she'd be back later and not to wait for her," said the maid. "Not your car, sir, his lordship went out in that himself, about eight o'clock."

Before I had time to take this in she left the room and Jenny Craddock appeared, looking as fresh as a little moss-rose washed with dew. I was so glad to see her that I didn't care what had become of the rest of the Stanways household. They could stay out of the picture indefinitely, for me.

"Come along!" I said, pulling out a chair for her and bringing her a grape-fruit and the powdered sugar, "you don't mind breakfasting with me?—I'm all that's left. Miss Corbyn seems to have got off the mark early."

She nodded, but said nothing. Now that I looked at her closer she seemed anxious and distraite; her eyes were troubled. I hated to see her that way; such a dainty little creature ought to have been out of the reach of trouble.

"My father's made a daybreak start, too," I added, "I feel a perfect sluggard."

"Your father!" she said, a little startled. "Do you know when he'll be back?"

"I don't," said I, "he might not be back at all."

"Why, what do you mean!"

"It wouldn't surprise me if he's eloped with your friend Miss Corbyn," said I, helping myself to a grilled sole. "They both seem pretty quick movers."

She laid down her fork, with a little peal of laughter. She laughed delightfully, I was glad to hear her laugh at anything, even at that. And, by the way, what a happy way out it would have been if only it were true. Unluckily it wasn't even possible.

"If they have," I added, "when my stepmother comes back she'll probably sling me out of the ancestral home. I don't think she has much use for me."

"That's a mistake of yours," said Jenny quietly, "she thinks a heap of you. She told me last night——" she stopped short, and added with a burst of enthusiasm, that surprised me, "Mr. Rolfe, don't you think she's just wonderful?"

"I have the profoundest admiration for Miss Corbyn," said I, sprinkling red pepper on my sole.

"So you ought to have!" she said warmly, and I felt myself growing redder than the pepper, and hotter; remembering the settlement with Crieff.

"No doubt," I said, "if you mean——"

"I don't mean anything," she interrupted quickly, with some confusion, "except that Elaine is a woman in a thousand. Not just because she stood up for Lord Trent when he—well, when he was having a little trouble. There isn't so much in that, considering what you did for her yesterday. But that's like Elaine. She hasn't always been wealthy. She's known what it is to have trouble herself. Anyway," she added, "you're glad she is staying on, aren't you?"

"Glad? I could go singing about the house!" said I, "for as long as she stays you'll stay too, won't you?"

"I suppose I shall stay as long as she wants me," said Jenny wistfully. "You see, Elaine has been very good to me. When she found me, and gave me this chance to travel with her, I was rather down and out——"

So, I thought, she has got some pull over you, too; and you have to do as she tells you. It didn't make me feel any the friendlier to Elaine Corbyn.

"You had known her before, I suppose?" I said; "old friends?"

"No, not very. I had known her before. But now, our positions are different, rather. You see I—we——"

"That doesn't matter, does it?" I said. She was obviously wanting to make it clear that she was dependent on Elaine—supposing me to be so dense that I didn't know it. It was a subject I was anxious to avoid.

"It matters this much anyway; that though it must all seem very strange to you—what happened on our journey down here, and after—you mustn't ask me any questions about Elaine."

"I wasn't going to," said I. "Miss Corbyn's affairs are Miss Corbyn's concern. Tell me about yourself."

She didn't seem to mind that, and was soon in full swing. Her people were small farmers in Michigan, her parents

died when she was a child, later she had a little money and got a business training in Princetown. She drifted to another little burg, where she held down a typist's job, but that dried up and she was presently in difficulties and lost her savings.

I listened to her entranced, not so much by what she told me for it was a simple record of back country and small-town life, as experienced by a girl thrown on her own resources, but for the pleasure of sitting next her and hearing her talk. I realised that I wasn't really learning much about her, I only knew I didn't want any interruptions; she seemed to like telling me, and I think we had forgotten our surroundings and everything else including the breakfast, when I looked up and saw Elaine Corbyn in her fur motoring cloak and hat, standing in the open window watching us. I wondered how long she had been there.

She stared at us with a cynically humorous little smile, and I thought I saw a spark of resentment in her eyes. She came forward; Jenny, flushing a little, rose and went out meekly.

"Don't go unless you've finished, dear," said Elaine coolly. Jenny said nothing. The door closed behind her. Elaine taking no notice of the chair pulled out for her, went to the sideboard and helped herself from one of the dishes.

"I'm hungry," she said; "there's a kick in the early morning air here. Nobody waited for me I hope? What sort of a night did you have, Mr. Rolfe?"

"A perfectly poisonous night!" I said ill-temperedly.

"Why?" she asked quickly, looking round at me. "Did anything happen?"

"A series of nightmares, that's all."

"No wonder," she said. "Sit down and smoke—you'll feel better. I don't mind tobacco, even at meals. Put on that

old pipe I can see sticking out of your vest pocket, and be good."

She attacked her breakfast in a healthy, businesslike way, and I found myself filling the old pipe and lighting it, in the arm-chair by the fire, in spite of an inclination to abstain all the more because she told me to do it. But I did want a smoke pretty badly, and I felt better.

"Well," said Elaine, "I suppose you're wondering——"

"Only how you managed to raise a car here at seven in the morning, if you've never been in the place before."

"Surely that's simple," she said. "I've got a map, Stanways Park is marked on it—Wheatbridge is the nearest market town, I looked up a garage there in your 'phone-book and rang them up to send an auto round as soon as I could wake the exchange. By the way I've a car of my own at the door now. I suppose you've plenty of room for it?"

"A car of your own. Before breakfast?"

"A second-hand Essex, I did a deal for it with a Mr. Brookfields, and brought it away; it will do till I get something better. One must have an auto; I've no use for hired cars and hired drivers."

What on earth could she have been after, that she must slip away like that in a car of her own, hours before most people were out of their beds. She couldn't, I thought, have been mad enough to go anywhere near the chalk-pit on the Cranwell road. She wouldn't be able to find the place, anyway. It was useless to pretend I was not intensely intrigued and interested, and rather anxious. But not a word of explanation did the girl offer, and since she had started this game of secrecy which seemed to me rather childish—though any one less childish than Elaine I have never met—I wouldn't ask her for any. . . .

She finished her breakfast, came round to the fireplace, and placed herself in a chair next me.

"You're very silent," she said.

"I thought silence was what you wanted."

She nodded, and looked at me rather oddly.

"It's been real good of you to do what I asked. It's a lot to ask anyone, there are few people who would have agreed to it. I'm fortunate, and believe me, I'm grateful. You feel now that I ought to tell you more, but I know it's safer for you—and for me too—if I don't. I'm too uncertain yet, what's going to happen. Will you be content still, to wait a little?"

"That's all right. I'm not saying I don't want to know, but tell me or not, when you please."

She paused a few moments and then said :

"That being so, it's not fair for me to ask you questions, is it? If there were anything you could tell me—well, I won't complain."

I had been thinking that out. Most people have their own secrets, which they couldn't endure being as much as breathed to anyone else. But I had one thing in my possession that she ought to know about, if there were any danger attaching to it. The Euston letter was in my pocket, there was nothing in it that I minded her seeing, and I had no right to keep it to myself, in the circumstances.

"Oh, never mind about fairness," I said, "I got this last night, it should interest you. If you can explain it it's more than I can."

I gave her the pencilled note. "Unless you're a fool, you'll keep out of matters you don't understand; if you set any value on your life leave Elaine Corbyn alone." I told her how I came by it, and watched her face while she read it; it certainly seemed to take her aback. She went through it twice, and examined it very carefully.

"You got this before you met me?" she said, her forehead knitting. "Can you see what it means—apart from a melodramatic sort of threat?"

"As far as I can see through it, the writer's idea is—to put it quite frankly—that Stanways is a house where a woman with a good deal of money might find herself getting rid of some of it—as you've discovered for yourself," said I. "We're known to be pretty hard up, and he was warning us off. Or else he credits me with some special knowledge about you, of which I'm really completely ignorant, and he wants to hint to me that I'm to keep off the grass, as you have a protector in the background," I concluded, still watching her.

"Have I? That's news to me," she said dryly. "I don't think you've guessed the answer. Is this stuff meant to be a threat against me—or you?"

"Threats never worry me. Miss Corbyn, that note isn't signed—but can't you tell who wrote it?"

She shook her head.

"I don't know . . . this letter beats me. But—I might find out," she added with a vindictive little gleam in her eyes, "and if I do, things will get lively. You and I could combine, Mr. Rolfe."

"Delighted," I said. "Then that note doesn't help you much?"

"Well, at present it's more puzzling than ever, but I believe I'll soon see my way through it." She thought for a moment. "There's nothing else, that you think I ought to know?"

There was one other item. There was Linke. But there I was up against a deadlock. There are limits to the humiliation one can stand. . . . I was wholly unable to tell her about the man, the scheme he had overheard between my father and myself, and what came of it. I would rather have been shot than have Elaine know that. Besides, Linke was my affair; I meant to deal with him myself.

"No. Nothing more," I said.

"Ah well . . . thank you for showing me this, anyway. Would you mind very much if I keep it?"

"You're welcome to it," I said, and left her staring at that confounded scribbled message as if it were something rare and precious. I was not anxious for any more questions from Elaine, I wanted to get away from her. As I reached the door, it was opened by the parlourmaid.

"Oh—I beg pardon, sir. There's a police inspector in the library. He asked if he might see you at once."

"Who—what?" I said.

"Inspector Begbie, sir, from Wheatbridge."

I closed the door and went across to the library, feeling just that tingle of apprehension that I suppose a man of my type does experience when unexpectedly visited by the police.

I knew Begbie, who had been to Stanways before. It might be the matter of a dog licence, or tickets for the police orphanage; if that were it, I felt inclined to subscribe generously. But if not, what had I got to face? Could they be on to that affair of the chalk-pit already?

Inspector Begbie was standing in a military attitude by the library table, on which lay his peaked cap with his gloves neatly disposed inside; his hair was brilliantly oiled. He was a large, heavy man with a chin like a boot, and he was looking very serious; but Begbie always looked serious. His manner was a blend of respectfulness and authority; he couldn't help being impressed by Stanways House. The last Lord Trent, our predecessor, had been a Justice and Deputy-Lieutenant of Hertfordshire. . . . Dad hasn't been offered either of these honours.

"Morning, sir," he said, "I wanted to see Lord Trent but they tell me he is out; I hope you can answer me some questions, for I mustn't lose time. Matter's urgent and grave."

"Sit down, Inspector," I said, taking a chair, "what's the trouble?"

"You have a man-servant here, sir—name Peter Linke, I believe?"

So it was Linke. I would far rather it had been the wreck on the Cranwell road which was what I was expecting . . . though even that would have been sufficiently awkward. Linke had enough on me, but he surely couldn't go to the police with it? Unaware what was coming I found myself instantly on the defensive, and trying not to show it.

"We had," said I, "what about him?"

"That's what I wish to find out, sir," said Begbie. "All I know for certain about him at present is that he is dead. I am hoping you can put me in the way of further information."

"Dead!" I said, staring at him blankly.

"Peter Linke's body was found by a woman, just inside Black Spinney on the borders of the park, at eight this morning. Bullet wound through his head."

XIII

CROSS FIRE

A BULLET through my own head would hardly have been more of a shock than this piece of news, sprung on me so abruptly. Then came a rush of mingled thoughts and emotions all crowding together . . . I think they were mainly relief, for in a crisis one is apt to put oneself first, and Linke's mouth was closed. Inspector Begbie sat squarely in front like an image, watching me. I hoped he was not a mind-reader—he didn't look like one.

"Linke dead?" I said dazedly.

"Murder. Not much doubt about that, sir," said Begbie. "The man had been shot through the skull, evidently at close quarters."

"Who on earth could have done such a thing? Is there anything to show who killed him? Do you suspect anybody?"

Begbie hesitated a moment.

"At present there's not a lot to go on, sir. The ground's hard and dry down there in the Spinney—no tracks. But I want to begin with Linke himself—he was in service at Stanways. What can you tell me about him?"

"Very little, except that he has been footman here for the past two weeks, and was discharged last night. He left the house, and my father's service, before 8 p.m."

"Discharged? And left before eight? Rather sudden. But that would account for his not having been missed," said Begbie, writing deliberately in his note-book. "The body was discovered by accident; he might not have been found, in a place like that, for a week or more. You saw him last night, sir? When?"

They could not possibly suspect me. I was not worrying about that. Yet the situation was deadly, and whoever had

killed this blackmailer I was entitled to keep myself out of it so far as I could, and still more the people with whom I was concerned.

"At about half-past seven," I said, "just before I left by car for London. And he must have quitted the house soon afterwards. Is there any way of telling when this thing happened?"

Again Begbie paused.

"Within limits we can fix that roughly," he said, "Doctor Brent saw him an hour ago; he had then been dead not less than ten hours."

"So he must have been killed between seven-thirty, when I saw him here, and eleven o'clock."

"Yes, sir. When did you get back from London?"

"About half-past ten. He was certainly not here then."

"What road did you use, coming home?"

"The Great North Road, and in by the lane and our south lodge gates."

"Then you must have passed within a hundred and fifty yards of Black Spinney, sir."

"Why—yes," I said. "Evidently. Yes, that's so."

"At a little before ten-thirty. If you'd only known, sir!" said Begbie reflectively. "Didn't see or hear anything unusual, of course? Didn't stop?"

"Why, no—I drove straight through."

"Drove straight through," said Begbie, making a note. "Anybody with you?"

"Yes, two ladies that I brought down from Euston. You don't, I suppose, want to see them? Have you any reason to think this crime had already been committed by the time I came past Black Spinney? Because if so——"

"I'm saying nothing definite yet, sir. But if you'll just answer my questions we'll get along quicker. You tell me Linke was discharged from Lord Trent's service last night;

that means summarily, I take it." He turned over a leaf of his note-book. "What was he discharged for?"

It is no use lying to the police, however stolid and innocent the individual police official may look. If you make one statement that they can later discover to be false the whole fabric collapses and you are up against it. To refuse to reply, or refer them to somebody else, is equally sure to rouse suspicion.

"He was fired for attending to keyholes instead of to his work—listening to conversation," I said briefly. "Some servants do these things. I caught him at it."

"I see. Conversation between yourself and Lord Trent, sir?"

"Yes."

"Certainly one wouldn't want to keep a man in one's employ after that, Mr. Rolfe," said the Inspector sympathetically; "you say you caught him at it. Where did this happen?"

"In this room. I thought I heard somebody at the door yonder. So—I threw it open suddenly——"

The door opened as I spoke. Elaine stopped short in the doorway, with Jenny Craddock close beside her. The interruption distracted me and I started up.

"Not in here please—private," I said hurriedly. The two girls withdrew, Jenny wide-eyed and rather startled. I shut the door behind them and returned to my chair.

I had seen Begbie glance with sudden interest at Elaine and Jenny, but he stuck to his seat with the same stolid serenity and continued his infernal questioning as if there had been no interruption.

"You threw the door open, Mr. Rolfe—and you found Linke there?"

"I found him in the lobby, close by. He was a quick mover."

"Then you didn't actually catch him listening. Did you accuse him of it?"

"Yes, and he denied it. His denial was not accepted, and he was fired—for misbehaviour; servants who listen are not reliable."

"Quite so. This is most helpful, Mr. Rolfe, it's just what I want to know. Evidently a dubious character—spying about like that. The conversation between you and his lordship was none of Linke's business, of course."

"None whatever."

"In fact, nothing private. It will be still more helpful—to the police—if you will tell me what it was about."

The Inspector waited, his eyes on my face.

"Oh, just the arrangements about a couple of guests we were expecting," said I.

"I see—no business of Linke's. Was it the two ladies I saw just now?"

I was getting rattled. Between wrath and nervousness—though I don't usually suffer from nerves—it was all I could do to keep my temper. I was having the worst five minutes I ever spent.

"Yes," I retorted. "They have nothing whatever to do with Linke."

"So far as you know? Of course, Mr. Rolfe, these questions are rather troublesome," said Begbie soothingly, "but you see I can't put them to Linke, and I've got to get down to bed-rock for the facts, they are bound to come out sooner or later, and though there may be nothing in this, you might be able to help me immensely."

"Certainly, if you'll leave my father's guests alone. They only landed from New York last night."

"There'll be no difficulty about that, sir. From New York? And their names are——?"

"Miss Elaine Corbyn, and Miss Craddock."

Begbie made another note deliberately.

"It's already quite clear, sir, that Lord Trent and you were discussing these ladies whom you were expecting, which of course was very natural—when Linke listened at that door and was interrupted and dismissed. This is very interesting—in fact it may be vital. It happened just before he left Stanways—for the last time. Will you tell me *just what it was* that was said concerning Miss Elaine Corbyn, which Linke overheard?"

"I can't remember what was said."

Begbie leaned forward, fixing me with that penetrating, gloomy eye of his.

"Think again, sir, and you'll remember," he said quietly.

I was up against it. I would sooner he had handcuffed me and charged me with the murder, than have given him the answer—in fact I would sooner have throttled him where he sat. And yet that answer he had got to have, one way or another; he had me cornered. Sick and savage, I reflected rapidly how to get out of it; and Begbie waited. He was patient; he had a dead man to account for.

Before I could speak the door opened again and my father came in. I was never quite so glad to see anybody in my life. He looked delightfully cool and unruffled, in light tweeds with a carnation in his button-hole.

"Good morning, Begbie," he said pleasantly, "I hear you want to see me."

"About your servant, Peter Linke, whose body was found by one of the farm hands at Black Spinney this morning, my lord," said the Inspector. My father stared at him in mild astonishment. Begbie repeated the facts in a few brief sentences, much as he had given them to me. Dad sat down with a sigh.

"A sinister business to hear about on a bright autumn morning like this," he said regretfully. "The first murder

that has occurred at Stanways for a century—it *is* a murder, I suppose? Do you know how the unfortunate fellow came by his death?”

“That is the point I’m investigating.”

“I don’t know that it surprises me as much as it otherwise would have: from what I saw of him I should say that Linke was a man who might very well have had enemies,” said my father thoughtfully. “Is he known to the police?”

“It’s rather early to say that. I know little more about him at present than what your son has told me,” replied Begbie guardedly, and he repeated the answers I had given him. “Now, my lord, will you tell me what it was that Linke took the trouble to try and overhear, between yourself and Mr. Rolfe, just before he left your service and met his death at the hands of someone whom it is my business to trace. I recognise that it should be a private matter, but—but I have got to get at the facts.”

“I will give you all the help I can,” said my father; “when Linke took such an interest in the keyhole yonder, he heard me urging my son not to miss the boat train at Euston, as our guest Miss Corbyn had to be brought to Stanways. At the same time I mentioned to my son that Miss Corbyn is a wealthy lady who would probably be bringing things of considerable value with her, and that he should be on the spot when she arrived—such precautions are necessary in the case of arrivals from abroad.”

“Was nothing more said than that, Lord Trent?”

“Nothing whatever. At that moment my son—who always has his wits about him—heard a slight noise at the door and discovered the footman indulging in espionage work which was not part of his duty. He was called in here, dismissed summarily and was out of the house twenty minutes later.”

“Did you see Linke again, after he left this room?”

"No. When he left the house, my son was already away in the car. We have no other conveyance. I heard afterwards from my housekeeper that Linke went on foot, after he had gone to her for his wages. Neither of us saw any more of him."

I felt a slight tightening of the throat, as I heard my father make these two statements with easy deliberation. I didn't look at him. We were committed to the course he had chosen.

By whose hand had Linke died? That question it was Begbie's task to solve—not mine. But when a man starts lying, where is it going to end? My only rule is to avoid lying for my own profit, which is mean work anyhow. But I don't see that one has the right to give other people away. There are times when it's impossible.

"It seems, Lord Trent, that your housekeeper saw and spoke to Linke after you had parted with him. That traces him a little further—I should like to have a word with her."

"That's torn it," thought I.

XIV

MRS. JESSOP

DAD pressed the bell twice. After a few moments Mrs. Jessop sailed in, the image of respectability in black silk and beads, the very model of a peer's housekeeper. She bowed to my father with that reverent little drop of the knee that I always admired, and looked at the Inspector as though he were an accidental spider that had strayed into the library and should be removed by the housemaid's broom. I wondered if she had heard of Linke's death; by her expression one would have thought not, but I felt convinced that she did know of it. The Inspector did not even mention it. In answer to his question she said:

"Linke came to me at seven o'clock last night and asked me for his wages, as he was discharged. I gave him his pay for this week and next. No, I didn't ask him for any reasons; it was his lordship's order and I was pleased enough he was leaving us. He said nothing more to me except to ask me how was he to get to the station. I replied that of course the car couldn't take him, as I knew it was wanted; I heard the car going away at half-past seven. Nobody drives it but Mr. Rolfe and his lordship. Linke had only one big bag that he put on the carrier's lorry that called before seven-thirty. He didn't go on the lorry himself, he went away on foot. I saw him from the window of my room, going down the north road through the park."

"Where is your window?"

"On the far side of the house, sir. No, not anywhere near the garage; that's on the south side."

Begbie made a note of her statement. But for my part I had listened to her with growing amazement. Linke had made his exit from Stanways before I did, and not after.

"That was the last you saw of him? Anybody else see or speak with him before he went?" asked Begbie.

"Not to my knowledge, sir. The rest of the staff were in the servants' hall. If they did they'd have mentioned it."

"You say you were glad to be rid of him. Why?"

"I didn't like the man. He knew his work, but I can tell you nothing about him; he never talked of himself. He had only been here a fortnight."

"Did you ever notice anything suspicious about him?"

"Only that he preferred listening to talking. Nothing definite, or I should have informed his lordship at once. Has he done something wrong?"

"He has been found shot, just outside the park, it seems, Mrs. Jessop," said my father, much as if he were announcing Linke's promotion to a better job, "and naturally one wants to ascertain how and why it happened; I gather the police have no doubt that he was murdered."

"Indeed, my lord, I always felt that he was not respectable."

"That is all you can tell us, madam?" said Begbie after a pause. "Then I will not trouble you any further."

"Then I can go, my lord?" she said, turning to my father for permission; he nodded kindly, and Mrs. Jessop went serenely out.

"Rather a cool hand, your housekeeper, Lord Trent," said Begbie dryly.

"I dislike emotional people about me," said Dad. "She is an excellent servant. The first quality in an English housekeeper should be imperturbable calm. Now, what more can I tell you?"

"Let us go back, Lord Trent, to what Linke evidently overheard before he left this house and met his death. In what way would that be likely to affect him and his movements, do you think?"

"I don't pretend to be able to probe into Linke's mind,"

said Dad, "but it seems likely to occur to a scoundrel like Linke, hearing Miss Corbyn was a lady of wealth, that he would stand a chance of getting some of it into his own hands. What other explanation is there?"

"You say he heard that Miss Corbyn was bringing articles of considerable value with her," said Begbie, and he turned to me. "Was that so, Mr. Rolfe, to your knowledge?"

"There was a jewel-case she brought with her in the car," I said, "it's in the house now."

"Now, now, Ken," interposed my father. "Miss Corbyn told me a few minutes since, that she went out this morning and deposited the case with Barclay's Bank at Wheatbridge when they opened at nine. I was relieved to hear it; burglaries at country houses are so common, as I told her last night."

"Did you mention Linke to her?"

"No, Linke was such an unpleasant subject to mention to a guest; I imagined and hoped that we had done with him, in fact I hardly gave him any further thought at the time. But I did mention that Stanways is rather a lonely place for anyone possessing valuables: we have no safe here. She evidently took it seriously. Very wise of her. Doesn't all this suggest what Linke's motive was, Inspector?"

Begbie drummed with his pencil on the table.

"It does, Lord Trent. It appears to fit it very well. But there's one thing overlooked. It doesn't by any means explain the motive of the man who shot him, and that's the man I'm after. Allow that Linke knew Miss Corbyn was wealthy, carried valuables, and might afford an opportunity for loot. Undesirable knowledge for him to have. It's a doubtful reason though, why anybody should risk his neck—or at best fifteen years in prison—by killing Linke. Why should he? It's the kind of thing that isn't done in this country. This is no manslaughter case either; the man was deliberately shot through the back of the head. There's more

to this than the matter of Miss Corbyn's jewel-case; there's a mystery here we haven't solved yet, and one point stands out. Assuming that Linke was a crook—he was killed by a bigger crook than Linke."

"Ah, there you are wading too deep for me," said my father, "the politics of the underworld are more in your line than in mine. I see you've arrived at a conclusion."

"Yes. That Linke was here for a purpose, that he knew before he took service with you that Miss Corbyn would be coming here, and he wished to get further information. It is very unlikely that he was listening on the off-chance, and heard of your two guests by pure coincidence."

"I am at a loss to guess how he could have known it," said Dad. "His sudden ending, then, and the motive for it, is a mystery which will have to be left to the police to solve."

"I shall be glad to see Miss Corbyn," said the Inspector, remaining seated. "And her friend. It is just possible they know more about Linke than your lordship does."

"I shall certainly be more careful about the servants I engage in future," said my father regretfully. "This sort of thing is very trying, and I hate upsetting my guests. However if you insist——"

He went out, and returned in a few minutes with Elaine and Jenny, whom he introduced to the Inspector with an apologetic air.

"Do either of you ladies know, or have you heard, of a man named Peter Linke" asked Begbie.

"Never heard the name. We only landed from America yesterday, we know nobody in this country," said Elaine. Jenny looked bewildered, and shook her head. The presence of the policeman seemed to strike her dumb.

"Apparently nobody knows who he is, nor where he came from last," said the Inspector dryly. "But he has heard your name, madam," he turned to Elaine. "He lost his job as

footman last night for listening at that keyhole to a conversation in which you and your movements were discussed. What he heard, so Lord Trent tells me, was that Mr. Rolfe was to meet your train at Euston and bring you here. Lord Trent discharged him on the spot. The next thing is that he was found dead this morning, in a wood a mile from here. He was shot through the head."

I saw Elaine's eyes narrow slightly. She heard this staggering news with alert attention, but she said nothing. Jenny was very white, and looked so aghast that I mentally cursed the Inspector, my father, the dead man, and everybody concerned, including myself.

"I'm sorry to trouble you with a business like this, madam," continued Begbie, "but I'd like you to come down to the wood with me and see if you can identify this man. There's nobody here seems to know who he is or where he came from last—names count for nothing anyway."

"The sooner it's done the better, I think," said Elaine. "I'm ready."

"Miss Craddock too, if she'll be so good," said the Inspector, donning his cap and picking up his gloves. I saw Jenny shrink.

"Elaine!" she said under her breath, "they can't want me. You see him."

"Save a lot of trouble if you come now, miss—won't take five minutes," said the Inspector soothingly. "You were mentioned, as well as Miss Corbyn. Only a matter of taking a look at him."

"You certainly have to come, Jenny," said Elaine decisively, "and don't wait to get your hat. Interests of justice."

"We'll all go," said my father, and the telephone on the table whirled, making me jump slightly, for my nerves were on edge. Dad calmly unhooked the receiver and listened.

"For you, Begbie," he said, "from police station, Wheat-

bridge," and handed him the receiver. Begbie caught at it eagerly. I saw his brows knit with surprise and impatience.

"Speaking . . . yes . . . burned? . . . *what* chalk-pit? . . . who is he? . . . who's in charge? . . . *two* car tracks? . . . why not? . . ."

There was silence for nearly a minute while he listened; I had that helpless cut-off feeling that you have when someone else is getting a message over the wires that you want to hear; the little I did hear galvanised me.

"Right. Advise headquarters and get down to it yourself, sergeant—I'm full up. Join you when I'm through here—Lord knows when that will be." He hung the receiver up with a snap. "Never rains but it pours. Now ladies, if you're ready."

"You appear to be having a busy day, Inspector," said my father; "a fresh clue, I hope?"

"Fresh case," said Begbie, briefly, "crashed car found on a lonely road south of here—one man dead, unrecognisable. Wreck burned. Sounds a queer business—no details yet." He opened the door and waited for us, marshalling us out.

I looked at Elaine. For all the notice she took of me, I might not have been there.

"Has it anything to do with this thing you are asking us about?" she said to Begbie. "You still want us?"

"I want you all the more, miss," he said; "one thing at a time. I won't keep you long."

If ever there was a time to speak it was now. But she let it pass, quite coolly. Not a word came from her. She linked her arm sympathetically in Jenny's and the two girls passed out through the hall; it seemed to me that Jenny wanted support. I could have done with some myself.

"You two gentlemen had best come too," said Begbie.

"I'm certainly coming," I replied shortly.

"And I," said my father, as if in a quiet rebuke to Begbie's

officiousness. "I will at least share my guests' discomfort. After all, the man was my servant." He paused as we reached the Inspector's little two-seater car standing at the porch, and inspected it as though it were an ash-bin. "We certainly can't crowd into this—get the Chrysler out, Ken."

Elaine stopped me.

"We don't need your car. Mine's just round the corner on the terrace and will hold us all. I'll drive and the Inspector can direct me. I want to get this over and done with."

I had been on the point of telling Dad that the Chrysler had a tyre down and couldn't go; I had no intention of taking unnecessary chances with Begbie and the family car. But Elaine settled that. We crowded into the shabby Essex Sedan that stood waiting on the terrace; Elaine driving while Jenny and I and Dad sat at the back, we sped away through the park.

BLACK SPINNEY

JENNY said nothing, the whole business was scuffling her dumb, and no wonder. I had a feeling that it wouldn't take much to make her jump out of the car and bolt for it. Not that she could personally have anything to fear, but to be taken to inspect a defunct thief just after breakfast was enough to upset the nerves of any girl, particularly such a retiring little creature as Jenny. I felt considerably strung up myself; there was no telling what Begbie's next move would be. That worried me less than the whiteness of Jenny's face and the way she shrank back against the cushions.

I slipped my hand over hers and pressed it; she didn't draw it away, and seemed even to get a little comfort out of it.

In front, Begbie was talking to Elaine as she drove, evidently questioning her; I heard the word 'jewel-case,' though most of what they said didn't reach me. I couldn't guess whether the answers satisfied him, but she was as cool and self-contained as ever.

No doubt she had taken the case to the bank, since she told us so. But that was no reason for leaving at seven in the morning—as I knew she had done; the bank doesn't open till nine and is only three miles away.

Anyway I didn't believe that the jewel-case had anything to do with the Linke affair, plausible though it sounded. That hare had been started by my father, it was a good one, but it was not for me to hunt it.

As for Elaine, she had kept silence about the chalk-pit crash at the very moment when, if ever, she should have spoken. I thought it a very dangerous game she was playing. She was not a woman to make any decision without a reason. If she did not speak, I couldn't.

The journey through the park was made in a couple of minutes. We turned out through the south gates into the lane. Half a mile beyond was Black Spinney, a little dark plantation of firs and larches, set in a triangle with its base against the lonely by-road.

We found a policeman of the Herts. Constabulary on guard by a gap in the Spinney fence. He saluted my father and the Inspector as we all got out of the car, and I saw another policeman standing some little way inside the wood.

"This way, please, and will you be good enough to follow close behind me," said Begbie, leading us to another gap farther up the lane, and from there we followed him in single file as he threaded his way between the trees. It was clear he did not want us to use the path by which the dead man had presumably entered the wood, though the ground looked to me too hard to show much in the way of footprints, and I'm not unused to trails, myself.

We reached the stationary police-sergeant I had seen from the road, and my father got another salute; the Trents may have fallen a little from their high estate, but the head of the family still counts for something, at any rate on his own ground. Close by, in a patch of withered bracken, lay Linke, as though he had fallen asleep.

He was stretched almost at full length, the knees slightly bent, the body partially on its side, with one shoulder raised, the lower arm extended. The face was not visible, for the sergeant had laid his waterproof cape over the head and shoulders.

There lay the man who had attempted to blackmail me, thirteen hours ago. It came home to me, the position I should be in if anyone knew that. Till now I had only felt concerned lest anybody should know what Linke knew. The fact that he had held me up for money on the strength of that knowledge was quite another item. And though I hold

that crime to be the vilest a man can commit, I no longer bore even Linke any malice; the account was closed.

Inspector Begbie bent down and lifted the cape.

The dead man's face lay in profile, clear to the view of all of us. The hair at the back of the head was matted with a dark stain, but not very noticeably except to a close observer.

Linke looked more attractive in death than ever he had in life; he had not been a bad-looking fellow. Now that his eyes were closed, the waxen-white features looked extraordinarily quiet and peaceful. I have seen many dead men, but however lightly and callously a man may hold absent death, he must become changed in its presence.

Inspector Begbie turned to Elaine. She looked steadily and gravely at the quiet face for what seemed to me an unnecessary length of time. Then she shook her head.

"No," she said decisively. "I have never seen this man before in my life."

Jenny had held back, unable to bring herself to face it. But Begbie waited, and it was Elaine who went to her, said something to her in an undertone and insisted on her coming forward, guiding her gently by the arm. I was inclined to hate her for it; the thing might be needful but I couldn't see why. Jenny looked, her face nearly as white as that of the dead man; it was as though she could hardly bring herself to look at all.

I heard her catch her breath slightly, and saw her eyes dilate; a look of doubt, and then of relief came into them as she scanned the dead face with the intentness of one who wants to make quite sure of something. Finally she drew back with a little shiver, and turned away.

"No," she said half audibly. "I don't know him—never seen him before."

"Are you sure?" said Begbie. He had noticed her hesitation. Again she paused.

"Quite sure. But—he reminds me a little, of a man I have seen—somewhere——"

"Who, and where?"

"I don't know—somewhere out West, I think." She seemed distressed. "It's hard to recall; it's so long ago that I've forgotten. There's a sort of likeness—resemblance. But I've never seen this man till now."

The Inspector shrugged his shoulders slightly. But for the trying situation to which he had brought the girl, he would probably have been impatient with her.

"If you're sure you don't know the man himself, it doesn't much matter who he's like, miss. Well, ladies, that's all. Neither of you can identify him. I thank you, and I'm sorry to have troubled you."

He turned away from the dead man and led us back to the car. Elaine and my father followed behind, slowly. I saw them talking together, and I guessed he would have plenty to say to her. It was evident that Begbie wanted to get us away from the place as soon as possible.

"If you'll run me back to the house I can bring my car out here and carry on," he said. "Finished? No, this business isn't finished; it's beginning."

BEGBIE'S CHALLENGE

DURING the brief journey back, Begbie remained silent. I couldn't tell from his manner whether he was disappointed, or on the other hand particularly pleased with himself. Even my father had nothing on Begbie in the matter of concealing his thoughts.

"I should like to have a few words with you, Lord Trent, before I leave," he said to Dad as we got out of the car, and my father and I accompanied him to the library. He did not seem to want the girls, who departed together.

"You may as well let me have any agency papers and references you got when you engaged Linke—not that they're likely to be of much use," he said briefly.

"I fear you haven't found me very helpful, Begbie," said my father, handing him a paper from his desk. "One does one's best; it is such a pleasure to give any possible aid to the police."

Begbie turned a grim eye on him.

"That is very good of you."

"Certainly," said Dad pleasantly. "I gather from the press that the police find the going rather heavy at present; a good deal of criticism of their methods—but for my part I am entirely for them. Once let public confidence in our guardians and protectors be shaken, and where are we?"

The Inspector's heavy eyes narrowed a little.

"Do you believe in hunches, Lord Trent?"

"An American phrase, isn't it? You mean premonitions. Sometimes I do."

"I have a hunch that it won't be very long before I lay my hands on the person who killed your servant, Linke."

"My ex-servant, Linke," said Dad. "I think you've a

difficult job before you, but I sincerely hope you will; the shooting on the Stanways estate is strictly preserved. Good morning, Begbie, remember I shall be always at your disposition, and my staff will have orders to give you any help they can and supply all possible information. You have my best wishes."

"Thank you, Lord Trent," said Begbie, and went out, closing the door behind him. He could hardly have had time to cross the hall before it opened again and Elaine appeared. Dad's face was grave and solicitous as he turned to her.

"I don't know how I'm to apologise for all this distressing business," he said anxiously. "Anything more unpardonable——"

"I don't know that you need apologise," said Elaine quietly, her eyes on his face. "I'm not a child, to complain of what can't be helped."

"It's enough to drive the most patient of guests away. It distresses me even more than it does you. I feared—well, you couldn't be blamed for wishing to leave us."

"No; I don't know that I want to go—unless you wish to get rid of me. I shall probably be as secure at Stanways as anywhere; besides, I don't see that I can very well go, as things are. And all my arrangements were made here, from the first."

"Now this is splendid of you, Elaine," said my father warmly. "You're not one of those women who hesitate and wobble; you can make a decision and stick to it. And now that this disturbing business is over——"

"Your Inspector Begbie doesn't seem to think that it's over."

"Oh, Begbie; I don't think he knows much about it."

"Don't you?" said Elaine, her eyes twinkling oddly. "I agree with you, I don't think he does either—yet. . . . But he's a persevering type."

"I shall leave it in his hands with perfect confidence that he will unravel it satisfactorily; it's really no business of mine," said Dad. "It's perfectly absurd, of course, that Begbie should have supposed you or Miss Craddock could know anything of this man Linke, who I regret should ever have entered my house, and is probably mixed up with other rascals of his own type. It's the devil of a job to get satisfactory servants nowadays; you never know where you are with them. But you'll excuse me a minute; I've been so much interrupted and there are orders I have to give."

He went out, leaving me alone with Elaine. There was a difficult silence; she seemed to be waiting for me to speak.

"So you're not going?" I said.

"Do you want me to go?"

"It's the very last thing on earth I want!"

Her eyes softened, and that defiant, challenging look died out of them. She came a little nearer, and looked at me rather oddly.

"Well, I suppose that's true in a way," she said, "and it's real nice of you. You've been very good all through this thing, and reliable. You're certainly loyal, and that's a quality worth while in a man. It's a comfort to find somebody who's got a backbone to them. Is there anything you want to say to me?"

"What can I say? Do you realise what we shall be up against if they bring this Cranwell wreck home to us, after Begbie announcing it before the whole company?"

"Oh, that. I think we can leave it to the people who are dealing with it; it's their job, not ours. And I agree with what your Inspector Begbie said—'one thing at a time.' After all, Mr. Rolfe," she said quietly, "neither you nor I committed any crime."

"All right," I said resignedly, "and suppose Begbie asks

me point blank if it was my car that drove up to the Cranwell chalk-pit last night, do you suggest I should deny it?"

"No. But I don't think he will. If he does, you can stick out your chest and say: 'I cannot tell a lie, Inspector, I did it with my little Chrysler,' and refer him to me. I'll explain and clear you."

"I'm dashed if you do," I said angrily, "the consequences aren't worrying me. I've no notion of hiding behind any girl's skirts."

"That's all right. Skirts are too skimpy to hide anything, these days. I quite understand you're thinking of me first, I particularly don't want it known, for the present, that I was mixed up with that car chase and the wreck till I know more about it—and perhaps not then. And I'm willing to take all chances."

"That's all to the good. You're taking plenty."

"I shall have quite a lot to tell you very soon, Mr. Rolfe, things are moving pretty fast. But I can't stay now, I'll have to get back to Jenny."

She moved to the door.

"It's rather strange I should need to look after her, when she's supposed to be looking after me. The girl's all broken up."

"This sort of thing is rough on her," I said.

Elaine stopped and turned round, looking at me queerly.

"You think so? Well—maybe. *She* doesn't want to go, any more than I do," said Elaine with a touch of acid in her voice as she went out.

I dropped into a chair, feeling for my pipe—the only comfort I'd got left—and thought things over rapidly as I struck a match and felt the bite of the tobacco.

Who had fired the shot that silenced Linke? Every man is entitled to live, but for the mere fact of his death I could certainly feel no regret. Even if very hard driven, I don't

believe I could take a man's life in cold blood. Who knew whether it was done in cold blood? How had he come by his end, and in whose interest, down there in the dark spinney?

It was a question I hardly dared answer, even to myself. But whatever the solution, somehow it didn't rouse anything like the revolt and resentment in my mind that—for instance—the squaring of Crieff had done. It was no use tormenting myself by thinking about it. I couldn't tackle it; it was not for me to hunt out the truth—quite the contrary. My lips were sealed and my hands were tied.

It did occur to me that the knowledge Linke had acquired, and his initiative in attempting to use it against me, didn't seem quite motive enough for anybody to take the risk of killing him unless there were a great deal more to be gained by it.

Just then my father came in, and tossed his hat on to a chair.

"Elaine gone?" he said. "Well, Ken, what do you think of it all?"

"I think we're gliding over uncommonly thin ice," I said grimly.

"We seem to be gliding over the solid efficient Begbie, and he bears very well, I think." Dad selected a cigar from the box and lit it carefully. "I wish he were at the devil. Altogether an annoying business, Ken. It looked like disturbing my arrangements. And I strongly dislike having my arrangements disturbed by outsiders. What's the matter with you, my boy? You surely need not let your peace of mind be upset over the matter of a dead blackmailer?"

I'm not very impressionable, but I looked at him with a touch of awe.

"Well sir," I said. "I think you'll prefer I should say nothing. I believed myself to be a pretty cool hand, but you've got me beaten into the back seats."

"You were cool enough, Ken. I was pleased with you. And I may tell you that Elaine is very pleased with you too, and with reason. You are what you would call solid with Elaine."

"I don't care whether I am or not!"

"Perhaps not, at the moment. But you will. And incidentally—Miss Craddock—Jenny," he said thoughtfully. "She's rather a nice little girl, that. I was noticing her a good deal to-day; there is more to her than one would have thought. Though it was a little unwise of Elaine to bring her——"

"I don't want to discuss either of them!" I said savagely.

"Very well, my boy, let it be. By the way," he added, "what's this about a car disaster on the Cranwell road last night?"

"You heard what Begbie said. A crash and a fire; somebody killed."

"Well, I hope there'll be no more of it or at this rate the county of Herts. will be strewn with corpses; I had always considered ours such a peaceful district. Still, it gives the police something to do and keeps them busy. I've been a little worried, but tight places are nothing new to me."

"I suppose you know," I said slowly, "that I'd stand by you whatever happened."

"That's good hearing, Ken. We've always stood by each other, you and I. And you may want a little support yourself," said my father cheerfully. "I daresay you hardly realise what trouble I'm taking to do the right thing by you. Don't you think I've managed rather well under difficult conditions?"

"If you call it managing well to cover us all with a net of lies that the police may blow a hole through any time. In these cases the truth pays best, even if it's tough."

"My dear boy, don't say solemn and stupid things. Which of us can afford the truth? We're rid of Linke; let's be thankful. You'll be declaring next that murder will out, or something

equally trite and untrue. Would you blame the man who killed such a ferret as that?"

"Who's talking of blame? I'm not the stone-throwing variety of animal. I live in a glass-house myself," I said a trifle bitterly. My father smiled.

"Yes, yes. *Noblesse oblige* . . . no smoke without fire . . . Once a gentleman always a gentleman, and an honest man's the noblest work of God. And we should remember we haven't only ourselves to think of when we harp on the truth. You recollect the Irish sportsman who would 'Rather die than tell a lie, except to save a lady'?"

This was more than I could stand.

"I wouldn't harp on that either if I were you," I said sourly. "Self-preservation's the first law of nature."

Dad nodded.

"Yes," he said, "I always keep that in mind."

THE 33 BULLET

AFTER the visit and inquisition by Begbie, the household was delightfully quiet for the rest of the day. One could hardly believe these devastating things had happened at all.

For my part the place was stifling me. I went for a long walk before lunch was announced, not returning till nearly dinner-time, thinking things over. Later I found there had been no news whatever, not so much as a telephone ring. The two girls joined us at dinner; they were very quiet and little was said. They retired soon afterwards. I avoided my father and went up to bed; I was feeling dead beat.

Though Linke was out of the way, as soon as I was back in the house and darkness fell, that strange sense of uneasiness and disquiet came back to me, haunting feeling that we were being overlooked; that some intangible influence was still at work. One can't account for these things, unless they merely arise from overstrained nerves. There was plenty of real cause for anxiety without that. This time I refused to give way to it, turned in, and slept like the dead. In the morning I came down late and breakfasted alone.

The first person I ran into was Tilden, the Wheatbridge doctor, rung for by the housekeeper to attend a parlourmaid who had collapsed during the night with fits of hysteria and failed to come down to duty. He had just seen his patient and he called out to me from the foot of the stairs.

"Hullo, Rolf! Most extraordinary case, this footman of yours. A bad business."

"What do you know about it?" I asked.

"I was called out to examine the body, and afterwards when it was removed to Hertford. I was in Black Spinney yesterday."

I got Tilden into the morning-room; he was willing enough to talk about it, though he pretended to be in a hurry. Such excitements are rare in our neighbourhood.

"I can only tell you such facts as a doctor can swear to," he said, "the police are keeping very close, and giving nothing away—it's my belief they're at sea as to who killed him and why, though old Begbie plays the sleuth-hound to the life. To me, this much is certain. Murder. No possible way out of that."

"Was he armed?"

Tilden looked at me in surprise.

"What makes you ask that? Queer thing, for a manservant to be armed. Oh, I see—Begbie's told you. I didn't think he got on to that till later."

I had made a slip. I knew Linke was armed when he left the house, for my foot told me that when it dismissed him from Stanways.

"Begbie did *not* tell me. I asked because, if the man did happen to be armed, it could be a case of self-defence and not murder. Or manslaughter at the worst."

Tilden shook his head.

"You can forget that, Rolfe. He was shot from behind. The bullet struck him in the occiput, passed through skull and brain. The man who did it meant making sure of him, he just dropped in his tracks. And yet you've put your finger on the spot—Linke *was* armed. Begbie's convinced about that."

"The odd thing is that no weapon was found on him. He'd a hip pocket, the button was open, and they found unmistakably that he'd carried a gun in it—I could see that much myself. There was the outline of it marked in the cloth, the bulge where a revolver drum had stretched it. Not enough to swear by, you'd think—but there were a couple of cartridges in one of his vest pockets. I saw them; short 44

revolver shells. The gun itself—gone. They've searched the wood for it; no result."

"Do they suppose the killer shot Linke with his own gun?"

"That certainly isn't so. The bullet that killed Linke wasn't fired at particularly close quarters——"

"Even though he was shot in the dark?"

"Yes. There was a fairly bright moon last night, if you remember—though it must have been pretty dark in the Spinney. Anyway, not close enough for the powder grains to lodge in his skin or his back hair—there's no trace of that, and these little pistols spit like cats. The main point is that the bullet passed clean through Linke's skull and lodged in an old tree trunk in front of him. It's a nickel-capped 33 bullet, the type that's used in a small Wesson automatic. That, or something very similar, was the weapon the murderer used."

Begbie had told me nothing of this. Had he, I wondered, known it when he took us to the Spinney?

"Used—and then, apparently, took Linke's gun away with him, but I don't see why he should do that," I said. "What's your theory about it all, Doctor?"

"Me? I don't deal in theories; I'm a scientist and work on facts. In any case sleuthing is not my job: I have a crowd of patients on my hands who need my attention more than this dead man, even if he had been worth saving," said Dr. Tilden as he collected his bag and moved to the door. Then he halted and looked back at me. "A strange business, Rolfe. It looks as if you—or rather your father—has been entertaining a crook unawares, whose activities have been cut short by some more efficient crook with a very strong motive for putting him out of the way. As it's generally accepted that dead men don't tell tales, that motive for the present is dark."

"It will stay in the dark till they find the man who killed him," said I, "if they ever do."

"Oh, they'll get him all right," said Tilden. "They always do in these queer, sensational cases that look so mysterious at first. I'll give you any odds that they rope the murderer in. There's only one crime in law that calls for the death penalty; one may hang a citizen by the neck with due formality and public approval, but one mustn't shoot a man through the head for one's own advantage. Well, I must be going—they may want me again."

Dr. Tilden looked at me searchingly; a habit of his derived doubtless from his practice, though I have never been one of his patients—and drove away. When he had gone I crossed the hall and went down the passage into the gun-room.

I looked at the three locked, glass-fronted cabinets. This was one of the best equipped rooms in the house. Nothing that a shooting man could want was lacking, except that a pair of Purdey ejectors were not in their place; they would pawn for a hundred pounds and must have cost over three times that. There were several other pieces, and two deer-stalking rifles, besides smaller arms. I am a fairly good shot myself, but I was never in Dad's class. I saw him once shoot against Winans the American, and draw the match—about the only man who could have done it.

I scarcely know what I expected to do in the gun-room, but I got the key and went through the first of the two cabinets, rummaging in the little drawers beneath the gun-rack. There was an untidy raffle of stuff in one of them; wire brushes, old, mixed-up shot gun and revolver cartridges, evidently long forgotten, and a couple of tarnished nickel-cased 33 shells. I slipped those at once into my pocket, and was hunting for more when I felt a hand laid on my shoulder and started as I turned round and faced the old man. He was

smiling affectionately, the cigar between his teeth, but his eyes were as hard as a gun barrel.

"Anything you want, Ken?" he said, and added rather mockingly, "Feel like a little shooting to take your mind off things? Take your choice—except the Purdeys."

"There isn't a 33 automatic in stock, is there?" I asked.

"A 33? Why?"

"It was a 33 bullet that killed Linke—so Tilden tells me. They've just found it."

"Indeed? How interesting, Ken. The next thing they will find, no doubt, is the gun that fired it; though that may take some doing. I wouldn't be seen dead with such an outlandish toy. I have never owned one."

"Look here, Dad——" I said under my breath.

"My dear boy," he replied very gently, "I want you to keep outside all this; it is not your affair. Get out of here. Go and look after your guest; or if that doesn't appeal at the moment, take a gun into the park and try to look as if you were on good terms with yourself. I'm afraid there isn't much to shoot on the place except vermin and I always recommend small calibres for those—far more sporting. There's a nice little Reilly double 20-bore over there."

"And Ken," he added, as I turned away. "Do stop worrying about the man Linke. It's so futile, and no concern of yours; nobody can possibly suspect you of having fired that shot."

"I'm beginning to wish they did," said I, and went out, closing the door silently. I went down to the garage to overhaul the car, and on the way I dropped the two nickel shells through a clink into the old covered well behind the yew fence; it is sixty feet deep, and I liked the little tinkling splash they made as they disappeared. There would be no getting them out of that. Quite impossible to drain the well

for it had once been tried; and there was a deep deposit of silt under the water.

I spent some time in the garage, and coming back past the well I rounded the corner of the yew hedge and suddenly became aware of Elaine, standing in the entrance of a little summer-house close by, on the edge of a patch of neglected rose garden. She beckoned to me.

XVIII

SPIKE O'DOWD

"I'VE been looking for you," said Elaine, "and I think it's time we got together. Come in here and sit down. That policeman hasn't shown up again yet?"

"No. There's no news—except what I got from the doctor."

She asked what it was, and I told her. There was no point in keeping a thing like that from her; it would become common knowledge very soon anyhow; besides, I wanted to see how she reacted to it. Elaine listened attentively, and made no comment. She did not seem to want to discuss Linke.

"Did you tell the Inspector about that message you got at Euston—warning you to steer clear of me?" she asked.

"Of course I didn't. You've got the letter. If you didn't see fit to tell him about it, how could I?"

"That's all right. If I hadn't taken it from you, would you have told him?"

"No," I said, a little irritably, "the letter was about you and had your name in it. You don't suppose I would hand over the correspondence of my friends to the police—not even," I added, remembering how she had dragged Jenny off to see the body, "in the interests of justice."

"You mean by justice, the discovery of the man who killed Linke," she said, with an odd inflexion in her voice. "Are there any circumstances in which you would put them on to that letter—if you found yourself driven to it?"

"I might," I said slowly. "It would depend. I don't know yet that the letter had anything to do with Linke."

She looked at me with the trace of a smile.

"No, we don't know that. I'm not thinking so much about Linke just now. See here, Ken—by the way you don't mind being on the list as Ken, do you? Your father calls me Elaine,

anything else seems a little stiff after what we've hustled through together this last two days. I feel like one of the family."

"Do! It sounds much more comforting."

Elaine's eyes twinkled.

"You're certainly comforting, Ken. But let's get on. The point is, not whether there's a connection between Linke and that letter, but whether there's any between him and the crash in the chalk-pit—which I owe to you. Who's that yonder?" she exclaimed, as a figure came in view, wheeling a cycle up to the back entrance. Her nerves seemed less steady than usual.

"It's the boy with the papers."

"Papers? Get them, quick!"

I was just as anxious to see them as she was. The papers arrive late in these backwoods of ours. My father never looks at anything but *The Times*; I let that go indoors and brought the *Mail* and our local Hertford sheet out to the summer-house, where we both searched them rapidly. To my surprise there was only the briefest reference to the Linke case. It was headed "Man-servant Found Shot," and the few details given were as bald as the heading. The report must have reached Fleet Street too late for any elaboration, the night before.

It looked to me as if Begbie were holding the thing back from the papers. I guessed that the journalists would be flocking down quick enough if they winded the scent of this case. . . . Lord Trent's footman murdered in a wayside spinney, and apparently not a clue to show why or how the crime was committed. There would be no keeping them away from it. But the police often ride off their allies of the Press until they are ready. Once they decide to ring the bell, the music starts.

On the other hand, plenty of publicity was given to the

death on the Cranwell Road . . . so much so that it overshadowed the Linke affair. Here it was in large headlines. I began to suspect Begbie of more subtlety than we had given him credit for.

MYSTERIOUS CAR WRECK

UNIDENTIFIED BODY

The burnt-out remnants of a motor-car were found early yesterday morning in a chalk-pit at the angle of a lonely by-road two miles south of Cranwell village, in Hertfordshire.

Nearby lay the body of a man, so disfigured as to be unrecognisable. The car was evidently travelling at high speed when it crashed through a fence on the edge of the pit. Investigations show that the driver of the car was not alone and there was almost certainly at least one other occupant at the time.

If so he—or they—have apparently vanished in the most mysterious manner, for no other remains have been found, nor was any report of the disaster made to the police nor to other authorities, though the wreck must have occurred a considerable time before the discovery was made. The loneliness of the spot accounts for the fact that the flames were not seen.

The car carried number-plates which are still legible and have been traced. The number is found to be false; the plates were substitutes or "fakes." The car is believed to have been a large six-cylinder Buick which was stolen from a London car-park two days ago.

Though the dead man is not certainly recognisable there is good reason for the belief that he is one O'Dowd, commonly known as "Spike" O'Dowd, a dangerous character who has served terms of imprisonment for jewel thefts, and one for robbery with violence.

If this is correct, what was the errand that took O'Dowd along the Cranwell Road, and how did the crash occur? What has become of his companion, assuming that he had one?

There were two cars at or near the spot, probably at the same time. The tracks of both are intermingled, but visible in the dust of the road. One was shod with new Dunlop tyres, the other had a set of Goodrich's. These latter lead to the brink of the pit. The tyres on the wrecked car are completely consumed by fire.

The stolen Buick had Goodrich tyres.

The car with the Dunlops has been tracked to the junction with the Great North Road, where all trace of it is lost.

Here the account ended. It looked as if further information was withheld. The finish was just a note of interrogation.

I read it at the same time as Elaine, both our heads close together over the paper. I felt an enormous relief.

If this account was right, I had baulked a notorious jail-bird who was out to commit a robbery, and had allowed him to crash and break his neck. That was all there was to it. They couldn't land me in any serious trouble for that nor the two girls either; even though there might be a kick because we hadn't gone straight to the police about it. Anyway I had committed no offence. Very much the contrary; in fact I thought they ought to present me with an illuminated address and the freedom of Hertford in a golden casket.

But when I looked at Elaine I found she was not sharing my satisfaction. She looked worried and anxious; I thought she seemed disappointed with the news, such as it was.

"Spike O'Dowd?" I said. "Ever hear of him?"

"Never, until now."

"Well, he's just a commonplace jewel thief, evidently—or rather was. We certainly needn't worry about him. The police will soon put that business right."

"If it were only that!" she said. "But who's the other man—the companion who was with him in the car? That's what I want to know. What's become of him—who was he—is he alive and has he got away with it? I've got to sit tight till

I find out. If I thought it was an ordinary jewel hold-up, I wouldn't worry . . . especially as it's failed."

"Look here, Elaine," said I, "this isn't any vacation trip to Europe you're taking. There was trouble of some sort for you in the States, and you left to get quit of it; why don't you let me help? Not that they'll start anything, after last night's show!"

"I'm rather hoping they will," she said quietly.

"You *hope* they will!"

"Yes. I'd be easier in my mind if they did. But I'm giving nothing away."

"Can't you see there's no getting away from this business now?—the police have placed O'Dowd and they'll be tailing the other man. If you're in any danger there's only one thing to do—tell them you were in it," I urged: "Tell them what you know."

"You mean—tell Inspector Begbie?"

"Of course!"

She looked at me with a queer little smile.

"Come now, Ken," she said, "did *you* tell Begbie all you know about Linke?"

I was dumb.

"Dare you?" she continued. "No. And haven't you someone to consider—besides yourself? Well, it's the same with me. I've troubles of my own."

She rose and left me suddenly, taking the newspaper with her, and disappeared into the house.

What did she know? What did she guess? And who was the untraced companion of Spike O'Dowd, who had apparently got away from the crashed car. Could Linke have given us the key to the mystery, if he had lived? Was the stolid Begbie likely to straighten all this out? And if he did, who would pay the penalty?

I pieced it together as well as I was able; my own part

in it, my father's silence, the behaviour of Elaine, and the fears of Jenny Craddock. And though I couldn't see my way through it all, one growing conviction focused itself in my mind, to the exclusion of everything else.

It had occurred to me before; it seemed such an odd idea that I rejected it. But now I couldn't get away from it; it looked to me a certainty. It surprised me that my father hadn't tumbled to it too.

Ten minutes later I was hunting round for Elaine, determined to put it to her. Instead I came on Jenny Craddock, all alone, in the morning-room.

She was looking much happier and more like herself; she seemed to have got over the shock of the previous day. She had a prettier frock on, though still a cheap one, and she looked dainty enough to eat. It was the first time for twenty-four hours that I had got her to myself. And I was full of my new discovery.

XIX

THE QUESTION

"W H E R E ' s Elaine?" I said quickly.

She looked at me with a touch of surprise.

"Family news," said I, "I'm to call her Elaine—we're all friends and fellow-conspirators together; mustn't stand on ceremony. We may be wearing numbers next if we're not careful. I'm going to take the plunge and call you Jenny."

"Why, of course!" she said laughing.

"I'm Ken, under-dog of the gang. Try and get Ken by heart, it's easy. Come and sit here on the sofa, I want to ask you something." I made room for her and she sat down.

"You were asking me about Elaine," she said, though I didn't care any longer where Elaine was. "She's gone out in the Essex, and doesn't want me. She told me to stay in the house, and——"

"And avoid me, and tell me nothing?" I suggested. Jenny flushed.

"Why do you say that? But you know I have to do what I'm told, anyway."

"Do I? I'm not so sure. I'm sorry; I—I'd hate to say anything that could hurt you."

"You haven't. We've done more to hurt you, I think. Have you seen this report in the papers?"

"Yes, and it isn't so bad; it needn't worry *you*."

"No, it's not so bad—now," she said, but she shrank a little. "I'm glad, because I don't see how it can harm you. Only I wish it could be known, and this secrecy wiped out. Far safer for her."

"Tell me," I said anxiously. "You must be scared stiff by all this; do you want to get out of Stanways? It's a wonder if you don't."

"I can't go, as long as Elaine stays. And—no, I don't want to go, now. For one thing, Mr. Rolfe——"

"Ken," I corrected.

"Ken—I don't see I should be better off anywhere else. I'd have nobody to help me at all."

"You won't want for that here," I said earnestly, "whatever turns up, your safety is going to be looked to first."

"Oh, I'm not worrying about myself!" said Jenny. "She is taking more risk than I am. Who can tell how it will end? Instead of clearing it up, we're wading deeper all the time. Ken, can't you straighten it out—can you see any light through it at all?"

"Sure thing, I can."

"What is it?" she exclaimed, turning to me.

And then I blurted it out, the thing that had been in my mind for twenty-four hours past.

"*You* are Elaine Corbyn. Your friend is Jenny Craddock, if there's any such person as Jenny Craddock. But Elaine Corbyn is sitting right next me on this sofa."

She stared at me in the blankest amazement; the idea didn't seem to get home to her, she was obviously wondering if I were crazy or intoxicated. I never saw anyone so surprised, and when she realised I was serious she sat back and went off into one fit of uncontrollable laughter. And I felt the biggest fool alive.

I never heard a girl laugh so much or so whole-heartedly. It was like a champagne bottle exploding and gurgling. I have said her laughter was musical; at any other time I might have found it so, but humour depends so much on the point of view.

"You know, Ken, you've been seeing too many motion-pictures!" she said, drying her eyes with a little wisp of handkerchief, her shoulders still shaking gently. "That's the kind of idea they'd use for the star episode; a real mystery. No, I'm not Elaine Corbyn."

Then the laughter faded from her lips and eyes.

"Elaine Corbyn . . . I wish to goodness I were," she said under her breath.

"Why should you wish that?"

"Why! Ah, things would be different. . . . Life would be easier for me—worth living," she said with an earnestness that startled me. The handkerchief was crushed into a ball in her palm. Then she turned and laid a hand on my sleeve with the most charming little gesture of penitence. "Ken, I'm so sorry; I didn't mean to laugh at you. It seemed so funny at the moment. But it really isn't at all. I only wish——"

"For goodness sake don't apologise to me—I was just an ass; it's good for a fellow to be laughed at. Somehow that idea got into my head," I said hurriedly, and added with much relief, "I'm frightfully glad you're not, that's all."

"Are you? Then that's all right, for you need not have any doubts about it whatever," she said.

"And you needn't have any fears. You say you wish you were Elaine; tell me, if you were, what would you do?"

"Do?" she said, her brow knitting. "I would find somebody that I felt I could trust, I would tell them all there is to be told and get them to help me through; I wouldn't keep anything back."

"And very sound too," said I; "you think Elaine ought to do that?"

"Elaine? It isn't for me to direct her. And—life can be very difficult for a woman."

"Life! What do you know about life; a child like you, just pulled out of your home town and set adrift like this—at your age," I said. Her eyes twinkled with laughter.

"I'm twenty-three," she said quietly, to my surprise, for I would never have placed her at over nineteen, "not quite an infant, and I've had my ups and downs; a girl matures

quicker than a man, and she's got her instincts to rely on too. I may not be as wise as Elaine, but I think I know as much of life as you do, Ken; even if I've not had quite your experience."

"Thank your stars you haven't!" I said. "Would you say I was a person to be trusted?"

"I haven't known you very long," she said simply. "But I'd trust you to any extent."

Before I could say anything in reply to that—and I don't know what on earth I could have said—I saw Elaine herself standing in the open doorway at the far end of the room. How long she had been there I don't know. She couldn't have heard us, but she was staring straight at us; we were innocent enough, but I suppose we must have looked very intimate. There was that gleam of anger and resentment in her that I had seen before, only never so marked as now.

She made the slightest little beckoning motion with her head as she went out again, and Jenny rose and followed after her as meekly as a dog.

I felt sick and savage with Elaine; I was fed up with it all. My temper isn't of the best at any time. I saw no more of either of them till dinner-time. Soon afterwards Jenny retired upstairs by herself. In no mood for the company of the others I retreated to the gun-room, and left it later, to wander about the grounds by myself, in the darkness.

As I came back past the open windows on the terrace I heard my father's voice; he must have been sitting close behind the curtains.

"But, my dear lady," he said, "if she's in the way, why don't you get rid of her?"

"Get rid of her!" said Elaine's voice, "I can't get rid of her, I'm fond of her too—and I owe a lot to her."

I hurried on and went to my own room. As I turned in I wondered what it was she owed to Jenny.

THE INQUEST

FIVE days have passed since the discovery of Linke's body; days remarkable for their quietude and absence of sensation. It has all been so different to what I expected, I can hardly realise it since it occurred to me to set down a record of the affair in writing. I know this state of calm cannot last, and I feel it is about to break.

It is strange that we have heard so little of Begbie—that confident official. His hunch doesn't seem to have come off; or maybe he is developing it still. He came to the house only once more, and had only a brief interview in the library with my father, who afterwards gave me an account of it which I didn't believe. Begbie did not ask to see me at all. The only notable thing that has occurred during the five days, was the inquest on Linke.

It was a formal affair, that inquest; from our point of view it went very smoothly. Neither of the girls was required to attend. Apart from the police witnesses, there were only four people summoned. The first thing that transpired in the enquiry was that Linke's references and credentials as a man-servant in search of a place, and which on the face of them seemed perfectly satisfactory, were faked, and cleverly faked at that.

My father admitted that he had never troubled to verify them. Servants were hard enough to get anyhow. He had taken them at their value from the London agency who had sent him Linke. The agency, it appeared, knew little or nothing of him; agencies seldom do.

The police themselves admitted that they had not yet been able to trace Linke. He was not known to them, and was not on their records. In fact they were able to tell the

Coroner just nothing at all about Linke, previous to the date of his death. The only fact, obvious to everybody was that he had been a shady character. The Coroner remarked dryly that it was likely more would soon be known about him.

My father testified that he had discharged Linke summarily for misconduct. The misconduct was specified; listening clandestinely to conversation between my father and myself instead of attending to his duties. What was the subject of that conversation? Lord Trent's arrangements for the reception of his guests, who were to be met in London by his son. Was there any need for secrecy about these arrangements, and did Lord Trent at the time attach importance to the fact that Linke listened to them? No, none at all; Linke was dismissed for conduct that could not be tolerated in a servant. I succeeded my father in the witness-box, and, on oath, gave similar evidence.

They let us down very lightly. Not a tithe of those searching queries that Begbie put to me at Stanways were repeated by the Coroner. I had only to answer his questions; they were very brief and direct. I wasn't bully-ragged about the details of the talk I had with my father when Linke listened to us—as I had feared I should be. Nobody, not even the jury, seemed to be much intrigued about that side of the case. In fact I didn't have to lie at all. I think I made a pretty good showing. I went into the witness-box inwardly quaking, and came out of it greatly relieved. And yet I had a secret conviction that there was trouble hotting up for us all the time—it was only postponed.

This was the first inquest I had ever attended, and it was a revelation to me. I had expected the case to be threshed out to the very last item. The truth is, there was nothing to thresh out. No arrest had been made. There was no finger to point definitely to anyone as having a motive for the

crime. The police were careful not to do anything of the sort. Probably they were not ready. Begbic gave his evidence with reserve.

The jury were there to decide, on the evidence in hand, how Linke had met his death. And that is what they did. My father's movements, and mine, were accounted for. Our housekeeper, a model of respectability, and the last person, so far as was known, to have seen Linke alive, gave her testimony. I could not seem to sense any sort of suspicion that my father or I had dismissed this unidentified footman and then shot him. The medical evidence was given, the 33 bullet was produced, the manner of the crime was reconstructed.

"It appears, gentlemen," said the Coroner quietly, at the conclusion, "that no evidence is yet available as to who was present in Black Spinney with Linke on the night of the 13th, and fired the shot that killed him. That matter is still under investigation, and may safely be left in the hands of the police."

He summed up briefly, and gave his directions. The jury, without leaving the benches, returned their verdict.

"Murder by a person or persons unknown."

As the spectators and witnesses shuffled out of the court and the Pressmen, with an air of disappointment, closed their note-books, I wondered how far there might be an understanding between the Coroner and the police, and I remembered that there is nothing final about an inquest. My father voiced the same thought as I drove him home to Stanways.

"The beginning, not the end, my dear Ken. The Coroner reports to Assizes, or the Court of King's Bench, and there they hope eventually to see the benefactor of his country who called the career of Peter Linke, facing the music—getting it in the neck, as our American friends would say.

Do you know, I doubt if they'll ever lay hands on him," he said, drawing thoughtfully at his cigar. "Poor Begbie! Ken, I thought you behaved very well at the inquest."

I didn't want to discuss that with him. And my opinion was that Begbie had a good deal more up his sleeve than my father reckoned. Dad has always been an optimist. It is lucky for him that he is also a philosopher. I kept out of his way when we got back to Stanways.

What relieved me most was that nothing had been said to us about the chalk-pit crash, and the police were still reticent concerning Spike O'Dowd and his companion. It did not look as if that had been joined up with the Linke tragedy. But that there was such a connection I never doubted, and I was waiting anxiously for it to flare up and scorch us.

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For two clear days Elaine has been away from us, entirely on her own. In London, I believe. Dad may have known where she was; probably he did, he was more in her confidence than I.

She missed the inquest altogether. I can't say I missed her. I had Jenny Craddock to myself nearly the whole time, and I made the most of it. That was the happiest forty-eight hours I had spent for many a month, with the most delightful little companion in the world. And during that interlude Stanways was a place of peace.

Jenny asked me about the inquest, or rather, seeing how anxious she was, I volunteered the information. I gave her a brief account, and told her to forget it for good. After that we paid no more attention to mysteries or worries of any kind. She said nothing about Elaine, and seemed glad to be quit of her. We just had a good time, and threw caution to the winds.

I drove her round the country in the Chrysler, we lunched

in old wayside inns, where she was as pleased as a child over black oak beams and swinging sign-boards. On the second day I got a couple of rough ponies from a farmer, and we rode over the chalk downs. To my surprise she rode like a cowboy; I never saw a girl go better. She had an awkward, kicking roan mare, and the way she handled it and galloped over ground riddled with rabbit-holes gave me something to think about, for there was no stopping her. I had thought till then that she hadn't much pluck. Pluck! why she had sand for six, when you knew her. And I got to know her well.

I can't write about that time in detail; it is too delightful a memory. I'm slow with women, but I began to think that Jenny liked me. And if that was so I didn't care what else happened. . . .

One thing I noticed was that my father had given up trying to head me off from Jenny, though he was certainly abreast of all that was going on, for he never missed anything. He was particularly nice to her, she got on really well with him, and she told me how much she liked him. No one can be more charming than Dad when he chooses. More than once I wondered if he had got the same fool notion into his head that I had been caught by . . . it looked like it to me. He only tackled me once.

"Ken, you're an attractive lad," he said, "but it's strange how badly you play your cards."

"Cards be damned," I said roughly. "I'm not playing poker. What do you mean?"

"Don't get heated," he answered with that maddening suavity of his. "I'm only calculating how many complete blunders you've made since this business began."

"I made one pretty bad break anyhow," I said abruptly, and then, feeling rather ashamed of myself and with a return to the old confidence between us—or perhaps I

wanted to see how he would take it—I made a confession of my challenge to Jenny.

He listened in silence, his eyes twinkling.

“Ken, my dear boy, you are rather absurd,” he said. “That little girl let you down very light. If you drop any more bricks like that you’ll deserve all you get. I see you’re off the track altogether; you’re wandering in the woods.”

“I’m not cut out for a witch-doctor; smelling out mysteries isn’t my line.”

“You would sooner go philandering about the country with a pretty girl. So might I have done at your age. No, mysteries are not in your line. There’s a refreshing directness about you, Ken. But it astonishes me that a fellow with as much straightforward horse-sense as you have should get into such a tangle and not see the way out. Still, when the opportunity arrives, I know you’ll grab it,” he sighed. “I wish Elaine would come back. I don’t know why, but I’m uneasy about her.”

“Not about Jenny?”

“No. She’s in no danger.”

That evening Elaine returned, as cool and matter-of-fact as ever. She gave no account of herself, at any rate not to me. She went straight upstairs; I think she had an interview with my father, and I scarcely saw her till she came down to dinner in a most overwhelming new frock that must have cost a striking figure; and it was a striking figure that it covered; I never saw Elaine look so well in anything. It suited her colouring and her dark, expressive eyes to perfection.

No one would have guessed that any cloud was hanging over her; she gave us her impressions of London, on a first visit, and was cheerful and witty and cynical. My father is good at that sort of thing, and the meal went gaily enough except for Jenny, who subsided in a sort of timid

reserve. Afterwards Dad retired to his library. Jenny passed out, as if she had had orders to leave Elaine alone with me.

Coffee had been sent into the gun-room, which I always consider the only home-like room in the house. Elaine made a signal to me which I obeyed, and we followed in together after the coffee. When we were alone she arranged herself gracefully in the big arm-chair facing the window and turned to me enquiringly.

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW

"EVERYTHING been quiet here?" asked Elaine.

"As the tomb," I replied. It was not a very happy way of putting it, for Linke had, I understand, been buried that day at Hertford.

"Was it as melancholy as all that?" she asked.

"It hasn't been melancholy at all," said I, "as far as I'm concerned. If you're thinking of the inquest, I suppose you read the account in the papers; I've nothing to add to it. Have you any news from London?"

She looked at me and seemed to be thinking hard; I had a feeling that she was about to let me into her confidence at last, yet she hesitated still.

"I wasn't thinking so much of Linke. I see the police haven't really placed him yet, and you'd think they could do that much, if he's an Englishman. But if he were an American it would be understandable. Did it ever occur to you he was that?"

It never had, while he was alive; his speech seemed to be that of the average English servant. But looking back, I felt less sure. I remembered too, that he had been here at least a fortnight before the two girls arrived.

"Was he?" I said bluntly. "You told Begbie you didn't know him. You wouldn't have said that, I suppose, if you had!"

"No—I should not. For it might be proved against me. But—like yourself, Ken, I am fighting rather shy of the police," she said quietly. "I think they are beaten just at present by both those cases. Linke is dead . . . I should think he was no great loss—to honest folk. But I agree his murderer ought to be brought to justice. He seems to

concern you, and Stanways, more than he does me. His mouth is stopped."

The phrase gave me a sudden, sick qualm. I looked at her, and she met my eye quite calmly, continuing without a break.

"What is in my mind now is those others—the men who chased us on Monday night. The police are stumped there again. That looks very reassuring. Linke is dead; Spike O'Dowd is dead, of that man who was with him there seems to be no trace. And yet, Ken, I'd got a feeling which never left me that I was trailed all the time I was in London. I couldn't prove it, or pin it down in any way . . . yet there it was."

"Trailed!" I exclaimed. "Well, what did you go alone for? If anyone meant making trouble for you, especially after what's happened already, they'd be ten times likelier to get it going in London than down here."

"You think so?"

"Of course I do. London for crooks, every time. Trailed! Does it occur to you it may have been the police—keeping you under observation?"

She stared at me; then she gave a strained little laugh.

"What for? To get between me and trouble? How should they know I need any protection?"

"Don't you be too sure what the police know, they seldom give themselves away. I wasn't thinking of protection——"

"You mean I'm under suspicion myself? Very likely you're right, but if anybody trailed me in London it wasn't the police. Something quite different. It was——"

She broke off and turned sharply, as the door opened. Her coolness was superficial, she was all on edge; I had never seen her so jumpy. The intruder was Jenny, who stopped short in the doorway, disconcerted as she met Elaine's eye.

"Am I not wanted?" she said, a little defiantly.

"Oh, come in," said Elaine, "and sit down. Jenny, Ken tells me I made a mistake going to London alone. What do you say?"

"He's probably right. But who can stop you doing whatever you've a mind to?"

"*You* don't mind, do you dear?" said Elaine with acid sweetness.

"What's the use of my minding? It's been quiet enough here."

"Quietness suits you so well."

I was edging for the door, anxious to make a getaway. I didn't know what was the matter with them, but when girls start scrapping it's no place for me.

"Don't go, Ken," said Elaine curtly. "I haven't finished with you yet. Nor with you, Jenny."

"I'd rather you left me out of it," retorted the girl.

"But I want you to hear it," said Elaine, dropping her voice. She motioned us to follow her to the ingle-nook at the end of the room—my room, too, my only private retreat in the house. Jenny went reluctantly; for my part I made no further objection. My temper was roughed up. If there was to be a row I was ready for it. I judged from her manner she had a revelation to make, and I wasn't going to miss it.

And as I passed by the window, I saw something out of the corner of my eye that brought me up short. It was just the merest glimpse.

The curtains were drawn, but the two tall casements were open for the night was mild and close. Between the curtain and the window jamb I saw the upper part of a face, a flat, snakey head, so dim in the shadow that it would have been passed unnoticed if the eyes had not moved. It was the eyes that betrayed it, peering at me, bright and dark and threatening.

I broke into an oath that took no account of the two girls, jumped across the room and went out through the window with one bounce. I was just aching for something that I could get a grip of, and here it was at last. I heard a scream from Jenny, and Elaine's voice crying out excitedly :

"Get him, Ken. Get him!"

As I landed on the gravel path I saw the man flitting away like a shadow across the lawn. I sprinted to cut him off from the gate and he turned sharp left—and I had got him. There was a high wall with two blind corners beyond the laurel hedge on that side, and no way out.

He reached the hedge not far ahead of me and plunged through it before he found out his mistake. I was in after him and heard a snarl and a scared oath as I grabbed at him in the gloom and felt my fingers skate over a close-cropped head that ducked out of reach; I just missed clinching with him and for the moment he slipped me.

It was as dark as Hades in there between the hedge and wall. I stopped dead, listening for the sound of him, heard a crash among the laurels farther along—I jumped through and saw him racing back across the lawn for the gate, with a start of half a dozen yards as I whooped and went after him hell for leather. The hunting of Man—there is nothing like it on earth. While I ran, judging whether I had the speed of him, I heard a cry.

Then a splitting crack, the white flash of a pistol-shot from the window, and I was sprawling on my face on the grass.

THE GIRL AND THE GUN

THE shock of the fall stupefied me for several moments, till I was vaguely conscious of Jenny kneeling beside me on the grass, raising my head, calling to me brokenly:

"Ken! Ken! . . . he's dying!"

There was a scuffle, and Elaine came flying out through the window.

"You've killed him!" cried Jenny wildly.

"Ken, I haven't hurt you? Ken, speak to me!"

I hadn't breath to speak to anybody; the wind was knocked out of me and my instep was nearly broken by a croquet hoop I had tripped over—I had stuck it there while teaching Jenny the infernal game the day before. My mouth was full of grass, my knee-cap wrung, and my shin bruised. I seemed to be the centre of about seven pairs of female hands searching me, and agonised voices asking where I was hurt.

"Oh, for Mike's sake!" I said, staggering up, "I'm not hit. If you were trying to hit me I'd be safe enough!"

The only thing certain was that the fellow had got right away. I looked round the dark lawn and realised that pursuit was hopeless even if I had been fit for it, and in a black fury I limped back to the window and climbed into the room.

I turned to help Jenny in; she was trembling violently and speechless with anger; for a moment I thought she was going to fly at Elaine, who followed immediately afterwards, breathing hard and very pale. She glanced at us both, looked hastily round the floor, made a dart for a little black pistol lying by the foot of the sofa, and snatched it up. I made a jump and wrenched it out of her hand.

"Give me that!" she exclaimed.

I shoved it into my pocket.

"Give it me, I tell you—!" She broke off, as a step sounded in the passage. "Ken!" she said under her breath. "Don't give me away!"

Somebody fumbled with the door handle and my father appeared, blinking at us like a man roused from sleep.

"Anything wrong?" he said, "I thought I heard——"

"Nothing," said I shortly.

He peered at me, and then at Elaine and Jenny, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Funny thing—I could have sworn . . . well, I'd shut that window if I were you. Nasty raw night."

He backed out again without another word, and as the door closed I heard Elaine draw in her breath.

"That's all right," she said. "It was about the worst moment of my life, Ken, when I saw you go down on your face. It's a pity that fellow who was watching got away. Gee!" she added softly, "it was a pity!"

I stared at her stupefied.

"Who was he?"

"Who was he! Why I'd give the biggest reward that was ever posted, if I could know that—if I could be sure of that! There was a chance to find out, to-night, and I've missed it. My luck wasn't in, Ken.

"You remember when the Buick crashed in the chalk-pit, and O'Dowd came to grief, there was a second man not accounted for. This might have been he, I don't know. Until I can get him out into the daylight I don't know what I'm up against—not for sure. And I've got to be sure."

"You can't do it with a gun!"

"Of course I can't. But if you want to know why I used it then, I'll tell you.

"When you had that mix-up with him in the hedge and came staggering out after him and collapsed, I thought he must have knifed you or something. And so I pulled at him,

and wouldn't have grieved if I'd killed him. You may say it was a fool thing to do, but we all do fool things sometimes when we're wrought up."

She shrugged her shoulders and gave a little laugh at she turned to Jenny.

"You see, Ken isn't worrying at all over the chance of getting hurt. What upsets him is finding that I own a gun."

"Have you had that beastly thing all the time?" said I.

"Yes. I've lived in places where it's a good thing to have. I'm pretty useful with it—by daylight. If you wish to know, I would never use it if there were any way of doing without it. You may say it's dangerous to own one; it may be more dangerous not to."

"As for that porch-climber he's likely to take the hint and keep running till his knees give out; which isn't what I wanted. I'm afraid you wouldn't have caught him, anyway. If I'd been alone I could have got acquainted with him. Now it's uncertain what the next move will be. I simply daren't give anything away. I'm fixed so that I have to play my own hand, you see."

"Without putting this up to Begbie—as anyone else would do?"

"Now ask yourself, Ken, how can I? Think it over! And don't suppose for a moment that I'm scared, either of one or the other."

"It's the last thing I ever supposed of you!"

Elaine laughed.

"For what I had to say to you and Jenny, it will wait till the morning, and then you'll learn it for yourselves. And now—my gun, please."

I took the automatic out and turned it over in my hand. I'm no gunman, and hate the feel of these little death-spitting brutes. The breech was slightly blackened where the shell had ejected itself.

"Thirty-three Wesson—old model," I said. "It was a 33 bullet from a Wesson—so they tell me—that killed Linke."

"And it might be this one—eh?" she said, "so you see why I can't leave it with you. Give it me, please!"

"You'll never see this again," I said, thrusting the pistol into my hip pocket. I picked up the spent shell that had rolled under the sofa, and pocketed that too.

She gave a queer little laugh, and shrugged her shoulders.

"I always get my own way in the end," said Elaine. "But I'm tired now, and I'm going to bed. Good night, Ken."

She went out abruptly. I was left alone with Jenny; her face was so strained and white that I caught her hands in mine.

"Has this wretched business scared you so?" I said.

"Scared me? I'm only scared for Elaine—and for you!" she said, and gave me a look and a sudden trembling pressure of her hands that set my heart racing; the touch of her was an intoxication. In another moment I should have pulled her to me and held her fast; I wanted her more than I ever wanted anything on earth. But she drew away from me, quick as a flash.

"Don't stop me now—I must go," she said breathlessly, and fled from the room. It seemed to me she was crying. That was what broke me up. I spent a few moments cursing the entire scheme of things, and registered an oath that I would see this business through to the finish whatever came of it. Jenny's troubles were mine. And I thought I saw the way out.

I fastened the window and shutters, took out the little Wesson, and cleaned it very carefully with a rod and a wad of cotton-waste from the gun cabinet. There is individuality even about a mass-production automatic such as Smith and Wesson turn out by the thousand; I made a note of the number, and noticed a long light scratch along the left side

of the butt. The first place that occurred to me was the old well behind the garage.

But after thinking it over I extracted the charger clip with its row of shells, went out quietly by the back entrance and consigned the clip to the depths of the well. The empty pistol itself I locked in a back drawer in my old roll-top desk in a recess of the gun-room.

I slipped a couple of duck-shot cartridges into the little double 20-bore, took it upstairs and set it handy against the head of my bed. If there were any shooting to be done I would do it myself. After getting into pyjamas I smoked a final cigarette sitting on the window-sill; the moon was rising over the pines and everything was quiet, save for the night wind stirring along the laurels.

I dropped into bed and fell asleep. For once my dreams were pleasant; they were concerned entirely with Jenny. I could still feel that quick pressure of her hands in mine. . . .

THE NEW CHAUFFEUR

AT eleven next morning I came out on to the drive feeling in good spirits and unusually pleased with myself—nearly always a sign of a bad day to come. I stared wonderingly at an immense Rolls-Royce that was drawn up opposite the porch, glittering and brand new. It had a body of the most sumptuous kind, and must have cost anything over three thousand.

The thing positively smelt of wealth and luxury. At the wheel, looking as if Stanways meant nothing to him, was a hard-faced man of about forty with small side whiskers, in a subdued sort of uniform that matched the colour of the car body. Even before I spoke to him I had the conviction that he was Scottish . . . I don't know why, but he had that air.

"Who on earth are you?" I said.

"My name's Andrew McRae, sir, and I'm engaged by Miss Corbyn to drive this car for her; just delivered," he replied, running his eye over it disparagingly. He spoke with a slight Scotch burr.

"You're in luck to have it to drive," said I. "I take it you despise any other job but this, and any car but a Rolls."

"Ye're wrong, sir," said the chauffeur calmly. "I'm a man who can turn my hand to any job that comes along."

I thought that was luckier still, if it was true. He would probably find plenty, if he stayed at Stanways. But I saw Elaine in the porch, and went to meet her.

"What do you think of the new flivver, Ken?" she said. "The Essex didn't do me credit, and it's gone."

"I like your chauffeur," said I, "he says he can turn his hand to any job, and if I were you the first I'd give him is to shave off those whiskers; they don't go with the car. As for

the Rolls I should say it will lift Dad's credit sky-high. Are you going to keep the thing here?"

"Yes—but I'm not quite sure for how long. Will you arrange for a place to keep it; so it will be handy if wanted?"

"I'll see to it now," I said, and went down to the garage feeling depressed. The sight of that fifteen thousand dollar car marked the gulf between myself and Elaine, and I thought she was foolish to buy it and bring it here at such a time as this—unless she wanted to advertise herself and her wealth. I shifted the Chrysler into the smaller shed to make room for it.

The garage was at the far end beyond the old stable yard, a considerable distance from the house, and as I was returning I saw Elaine come out of the porch, closely followed by Jenny. I had hardly a glimpse of them; the whole thing happened so swiftly that it seemed to be done all in one motion, yet without any obvious haste. In a few seconds both girls were in the car, which at once glided away. There was a big trunk strapped on the carrier.

The speed of a big Rolls is deceptive. It faded noiselessly away down the park road at an incredible pace, and was gone almost before I realised what had occurred. Elaine was always a hustler. For a moment I chuckled, then a chill of consternation struck through me. Was this the last of them? Had Elaine given up and quit?

I hurried back to the house. It seemed as desolate and empty as the rind of a stripped fruit, now that the two girls were gone.

I found my father sitting by one of the side windows of the hall which gave a view over the park and approaches. He was frowning slightly, his cigar smouldered in an ash-tray beside him, but when I came in he turned to me and appeared perfectly at ease.

"She's cleared out!" I exclaimed.

"She'll come back," he said. "Don't look so lost, Ken. You won't be long deprived of your fair lady."

"What do you mean, my fair lady!" I said furiously.

"Your dark lady, then," said my father, "don't take things so hardly, my boy. I'm very well pleased, myself. Cultivate philosophy, like me."

He left me seething with anxiety and resentment; still, I did get some comfort from him—he had such a way of being right. But the more I thought it over the more convinced I became that Elaine had taken final leave—anybody who could get away from Stanways would be foolish to stop there, and probably the best thing I could do was to clear out myself; both on their account and mine. Yet I couldn't believe they would both quit and leave me flat like that—without a word. But how did I know my movements were not being watched? Some instinct told me not to quit.

It was one of the worst times I ever spent, till about nine next night I passed by the landing windows and saw the Rolls gliding noiselessly as a ghost along the track to the garage. I hurried down, and there was Elaine coming up the stairs—alone.

"Hullo Ken!" she said. "How nice to be back in the old home—I was always a home-lover. Aren't you glad to see me?"

"Glad! I've felt like mud ever since you went. This is my lucky day. Where's Jenny—did you leave her downstairs?"

She looked at me a moment before answering. Her eyes hardened.

"No. I did not."

I had taken it for granted they had returned together. Only now did I realise she had come back alone. She wanted Jenny out of my way. She had always been hostile to me; she had butted in and done her best to separate us every time she got a chance to do it. Why did this woman think she had

the right to run other people's affairs? A savage resentment took hold of me; I would have given a good deal to tell Elaine exactly what I thought of her, but I could only stare at her speechlessly.

"No, that's not the reason," she said, quickly, answering the thought that I couldn't put into words. "Try and get yourself out of the picture for a moment. I want a free hand here for the next few days; things are going to be difficult—don't you see that Jenny is best cut of it?"

I was a fool not to have thought of that; the loss of Jenny seemed to blot out everything else.

"Where is she?" I said.

"In London. Lost among six millions of other nonentities, and she'll stay there awhile."

I got the idea. Jenny had been dropped on one of the many routes up to town—the best way to lose her at short notice. But I didn't believe for a moment that it was Elaine's real reason for making that sudden getaway in the morning. And it looked none too good to me.

"Do you suppose you can play hunt the slipper over England in a brand-new Rolls that shows up like a flash-light advertisement? Just because you had the speed of Begbie you don't imagine he couldn't 'phone ahead of you and get you marked down wherever you went?" I said, impatiently.

Elaine laughed.

"I managed better than that. Get Begbie out of your head. Now let me go up, and I'll see you when I've changed. I've had a busy day and what I want is a little restfulness and peace."

She left me feeling far from peaceful, though she always had a gift for smoothing things over. I felt more certain all the time that she had shifted Jenny for some reason of her own, and not from any concern for the girl's safety.

For when one got down to it, Jenny wasn't in any serious danger.

There was a power and a driving force in Elaine that one couldn't get away from. There was a wonderful charm and attraction about her too, when she chose to use them. Only one always felt there was some motive behind it which one could not fathom. She had done practically what she liked with me since she came to Stanways, often in the face of my own judgement, and there are few people who have ever done that. All that we had gone through together certainly did bind us close; it was a tie that couldn't be denied or shaken off.

Elaine had made an extraordinary difference to Stanways already in the few days she had been there. She had got my father to let her re-arrange the shading of the electrics, the lighting and the curtains in the big hall. He was willing enough to let her do whatever she liked. She had taste—a magic touch. I don't notice these things much, but I thought I had never seen the old place looking so beautiful as it did when I joined her in the hall later, the lights glowing softly on the pictures and armour, and a fire of cedar logs on the great hearth, scenting it all. She had made the place look like home instead of like a barrack; it had been the home of my race for centuries, and I wondered if the old Rolfes on the canvases round the walls felt it too. Somehow it got right hold of me.

Elaine was wearing an unusually simple evening frock, and just a single little ruby hanging about her neck by a gossamer gold chain. It's strange what distinction these Western women have. I suppose she came of ordinary work-a-day people, and even this freight of money had not been with her long, but she looked a thoroughbred from head to heel. She fitted Stanways better than I did.

We sat together in two deep arm-chairs near the fire;

there was something about her to-night that fascinated me; I should have felt it much more if I had never met Jenny. She wouldn't talk about the things I had my mind on, the menaces and mystery that hung over us, and I was glad to forget them for a few moments, though I tried to get started.

"Tell me about yourself, Ken," she said, leaning back in her chair, the firelight playing on her face, "you're hard-shelled, I never seem to get through your armour. What are you going to do with your life—supposing you come through this thing with a whole skin?"

"Do? What is there for me to do here? If you hadn't come I'd have been half-way back to the West by now. That's where I really belong."

"And what do you think you'll find in the West? Happiness?"

"Happiness!" said I, "that's a queer thing for a man to go hunting. It's something that creeps into your heart when you're not even dreaming of it—it comes only to the fortunate. No—to hoe a row for myself; follow my luck and catch up with it—and hold on. That's all I can hope to do and that's what I'm out for—the stuff."

"The stuff—or happiness!" She gave a queer little laugh and stopped with a catch in her voice. "Perhaps you'll find them both."

"I wonder."

"Ken," she said, "do you think you need go so far? You might make good, nearer home, maybe. You count for something here, don't you; you've a good start—and there's much more to you than you believe."

"To me!" I said. "Why, what am I? Heir to thirty cents, and a useless title. That counts for nothing these days. Less use than ever, to a rough-neck like me."

"What makes you kick so hard against Stanways, Ken? There's a great deal to that too. A pity to let it go."

"Maybe I wouldn't, if it were what it might be. I've been feeling that, more and more. To you, if it wasn't for the things that have happened here, I should think it would be as dull as death."

"Places don't mean so much to women, as folks do," she said. "It's strange how blind men are."

She rose, and I remembered thinking how graceful she was as she moved over to the radio set and opened it. It was long since I'd taken much interest in the thing; my father used it to get the racing news. She turned the switch, and the old hall filled with a flood of ringing music—the dance orchestra at the Carlton.

Horn and saxophone and violin, fine heart-lifting stuff as sweet as a blackbird's pipe and as merry as a nigger whistling a breakdown, with just that note of sentiment in it that gets your pulse going. Some people sneer at that sort of music; it's always good enough for me. It brought all London into Stanways like the touch of a magician, it sang of wealth and yellow wine and laughter and the joy of living.

And there was Elaine standing in front of me, smiling, her dress shimmering, the ruby red on the cream of her throat and the challenge in her eyes.

"You said you had no parlour tricks, Ken. Can you dance?"

Dancing's one of the things I'm not so bad at—in a moment I had hold of Elaine and we were at it, in full swing. It was an age since I'd had a girl in my arms, and in all my life I've never had a partner like Elaine. She was wonderful, she danced like thistledown. And she looked up into my eyes and laughed.

"You're not so bad, Ken, for a rough-neck!"

It was an intoxication. I don't know how long it lasted, how often we danced, nor what I said or did . . . I thought

once I saw my father's face for a moment, at the end of the hall, but it faded out. And at last the music died into silence.

We stopped, both of us, in the centre of the hall . . . and old Big Ben lifted his midnight voice, boom after boom, solemn and slow, the great bell in the Clock Tower sixty miles away came to us as clear as if we were standing in Westminster under the shadow of the Abbey. That deep bronze voice . . . how the memory of it stirs the heart of the exile. And I felt Elaine's heart beating against mine.

I was spellbound; till the end came and the last note died away I don't think I realised that I was holding her to me, my arms round her. And she stayed like that, as quietly as a child. . . .

I went up to bed, my head swimming. . . .

XXIV

AGAINST ORDERS

I CANNOT in this record of events, set down what happened at Stanways during the next three days. A woman might write it, but it's beyond me.

Begbie never came near us. The mysterious watcher, too, seemed to have quit, perhaps he found Stanways too dangerous. No news reached us—at least none reached me. It was the calm before the tempest. And yet for me it was the fullest time I had had since our guests first came, and the most difficult.

Elaine and I were together nearly all the while. I see now that I never understood her. She compelled admiration, and, in a sense, devotion; quite apart from her bright, quick brain and her courage, there was something great about Elaine. And behind it, as I thought, there was something little; a bitterness or a vindictiveness, though she did not show it to me openly.

If I were the sort of fool who thinks it natural that a woman should care for him and make him her chief interest in life, I might have had some excuse for thinking it during that time. But always there was the lurking conviction in me that at the bottom of her heart she rather disliked me; that she had it in for me and wouldn't be sorry to lead me on and then let me down with a crash.

I couldn't get that out of my head. What her reason was I could not fathom—unless that she resented the idea that my prospective title and position were a prize, and there was some strain of cruelty in her that led her to get me to her feet and then leave me flat.

It angered me; I couldn't see why she should think so, and out of sheer perversity I played up to her for all I was

worth; she wasn't Jenny, and I did not care what she might do or not do. It was her treatment of Jenny that galled me. I was willing to do anything to keep on the right side of Elaine rather than risk losing Jenny.

Lord forgive us! what a poor show we make when we start judging each other, and how little I knew of Elaine. It was Jenny who was in my mind all the time; and I tried to keep it from her—not to let her see it.

The odd thing was that when Elaine was not with me, she was generally with Dad. She would sit with him in the library by the hour together; what they had to say to each other I never knew. On these occasions she didn't want me; I suppose she felt the need of getting next to a superior intelligence to mine. It was on the evening of the second day that Dad remarked to me with unusual seriousness:

"You seem to be getting on excellent terms with Elaine, Ken."

"You think so, do you?" I said.

"Surely it's obvious."

"Since you see so much," I said, exasperated, "can't you see she intends doing her best to make a fool of me; though why she should take the trouble I don't know."

"I don't see how she can make a more complete fool of you than you are, my dear Ken. Even Elaine cannot improve on Nature. I mean, of course, a fool where women are concerned. I suppose you were born blind, like a puppy, and have never got your eyes open."

"Blind—to what! Look here," I said hotly, for my nerves were rasped beyond endurance, "it sickens me to be talking of a woman in this way behind her back, but you must be blinder than I if you suppose Elaine is the woman I would ask to marry me. Is that idea still in your mind—has it come back to you? If so get it out—it's the one thing on this earth that will never happen now."

"Is that final?" he asked quietly.

"It's completely final. So forget it."

"Very well," he said.

He turned away, and paused to look back at me.

"That being the case take one word of advice from me, Ken, and stop playing with fire . . . the kind of fire that has burned better men than you to a cinder."

He retreated into the library and closed the door. I was rather taken aback by the quiet way he accepted the situation. I thought we were on the brink of what had never happened between us before; an explosion and a quarrel. I was ready for it, yet it was a relief to know we had escaped it. But I had never been able to fathom my father's mind; to me he was impenetrable as the Sphinx.

He must have known for some time past that the only woman I cared for was Jenny. That fact was fatal to all his plans, and he knew it—yet he didn't seem to object to it any longer. I wondered more than once if he had anything to do with her disappearance from Stanways. But it was not so. That was Elaine's doing, and Elaine's only.

Elaine and my father were alone together a long time that afternoon. I cleared out, and took the Chrysler into Hertford. When I got back in the evening they were still there; I saw their shadows on the blind as I came up the drive. They were making a lengthy sitting of it. I knew Elaine would be wanting to see me, but I felt I couldn't stand any more. All I wanted was to be out of her way. I wanted to be quit of the whole business; I was sick of it, sick at heart.

Somehow I could feel there was fresh trouble coming, just as fish sink to the bottom and lie sullen when they feel there's thunder in the air. How close the crisis was to me I never guessed, nor its nature. If I had, I couldn't have stayed to face it. I should have left that accursed house within the hour.

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It was close on seven when, coming downstairs, I saw from a landing window one of the Brookfields hiring cars sneaking quietly away from the front door. I went down, wondering who had deserted us. I found instead that it was an arrival.

It was Jenny! My heart leaped at the sight of her, and all the shadows and doubts that were oppressing me lifted like a mist when the sun breaks. She was standing alone in the porch, muffled in a fur cloak and a hat that concealed pretty well everything but that adorable little nose and mouth of hers. She had opened the door herself and seemed trying to summon up enough courage to enter the house. I hurried down to her, calling her by name, my hands outstretched to take hers. I hardly knew what I said or did.

"Are you surprised to see me—or glad?" she said with a shy little laugh that went to my heart, and she put her hands in mine as impulsively as a child. "I had to come back—I simply had to," she added quickly, "how are things going here?"

"All quiet on the front!" I said, and true or not I didn't care; nothing mattered except that she had come back. If there was any looking after Jenny to be done that was going to be my job, anything was better than not knowing what had become of her.

"I know I oughtn't to have come, but I'm going to see for myself what's doing here, and what is happening to you," she said as we entered the hall. Elaine was coming down the great stairway in a gorgeous orange and black evening frock, and Jenny stopped dead. "Now there's going to be a row!"

Elaine halted and gave her a clear, dark stare, which Jenny met with a tilted chin and the quaintest little air of defiance, but said nothing.

"So here you are—in spite of my orders," said Elaine sharply. "Well, come upstairs. I've plenty to say to you, and you may as well hear it now."

"I think now is the best time for it—it's what I've come for," said Jenny, and they went up together, Elaine towering over her like—as it seemed to me—a policeman with a prisoner. It galled me so much to see it that all my old hostility to Elaine returned, but it didn't damp me too much—I had a feeling that Elaine was going to get as good as she gave and my spirits were too high for damping. I met my father coming out of the gun-room.

"Jenny's back!" I said.

"I saw her arrive," he replied, "and I saw you greet her, Ken. I'm glad she's come back—we've all missed Jenny. The old place hasn't been the same without her. I'm not sorry to see you cheering up. But one word of advice my dear boy, take care what you're about with Elaine. She isn't too pleased, and you don't know what you're in for."

He paused, as if expecting me to ask a question, but I left him and went to my room to change. I neither understood him nor cared much what trouble came along, as long as Jenny could be steered wide of it. But when the girls came down to dinner and we all got together, Jenny was keeping her end up better than Elaine.

If there had been any sort of a row between them, it looked to me as if Jenny had had the best of it. She had thrown off her timidity, she laughed and sparkled and was more delightful even than I had ever seen her; she was wearing a simple but amazingly pretty frock that I suppose she had bought in town, and she talked as though she had been up on a vacation instead of being whisked away at a moment's notice and trailed by the police. I could not take my eyes off her. My father was as charming to her as she was to him. He was evidently delighted with her, and he kept the balance between her and Elaine with a tact I could never have approached. But it wasn't too successful.

Elaine was unusually silent and reserved, and rather pale.

I had a sense of something tense and electric in the situation; there was thunder brewing. Even under Jenny's gaiety was a veiled uneasiness. I had a feeling of danger, outside and around us, enveloping us all.

As I looked across the table at Jenny a pang of swift, sharp anxiety shot through me. She shouldn't have come back. If anything went wrong here at Stanways, and some unforeseen tragedy drew her into its net, I would never forgive myself as long as life lasted.

"What's the matter, Ken!" she said to me, laughing, "I've never seen you so quiet."

"I'm quietest when I'm happy," I said, "when you hear me raising a riot you'll know things are going wrong."

I got away when the three of them went into the library for coffee, and took a turn round outside the house. It was very dark, and a sprinkle of rain was falling; it had been showery and close all day. I can think better in the open air, the closeness of the dining-room and the sickly scent of arum lilies with which the housekeeper had decorated the table stifled me. Then I came in and made for the gun-room, and my private desk in the recess. The windows and shutters were fastened.

I unlocked the roll-top and snicked down the concealed catch of the little drawer at the back, where I had deposited the Wesson automatic on the night I took it from Elaine.

The pistol was gone.

THE OPEN DOOR

ELAINE'S gun, which she ought never to have owned, had disappeared. I had not touched the desk since the moment I put it there, it was double-locked and the key was on my ring. Who had taken the thing? Elaine certainly couldn't have known where it was, much less get at it. I stared at the empty drawer, it seemed to leer back at me, as if to say, 'Now what?'

I went after Elaine at once. She had got to hear about this without delay, I liked the look of it less than ever. Neither of the girls were in the library, and there was no sign of my father. I guessed what had happened. Elaine had asserted her authority and packed Jenny off to bed, probably on the pretext that she was tired after her journey. That was all to the good; I wanted to get Elaine by herself.

There was a boudoir next the room and opening out of it—it had been fitted up for her as a boudoir anyhow and I suppose that's a good enough name for it; it was the best room on the floor and was Elaine's inviolate sanctuary; she spent most of her time there when she wanted to be alone. But the time for privacy had gone by, she had got to see me.

I made for the door and was just about to rap, when I stopped short; both the girls were there together, their voices, raised in dispute, came muffled through the panel, rapidly and so mingled that I couldn't sort out one from the other or tell which was speaking.

"I tell you I can't go on with it! . . . it's more than I can stand! . . ."

"You've got to . . . you gave me your word you would see it through . . . you have to stick to that. . . ."

And then in a choking tone, with what sounded like a sob:

"If anything goes wrong now . . . I think I'd kill myself!"

I quitted on the spot—hurried away uneasily down the passage. What it was about I didn't know, but one couldn't lurk behind a door and listen to that sort of thing—one member of the household had been shot for eavesdropping, and deserved what he got.

I had the wind up. I didn't feel I could butt into Elaine's sanctuary and interrupt the two of them at a moment like that. And if they happened to open the door and discover me there, what should I look like? I got out of it and went down into the hall.

Then I began to rage at myself. What was this new trouble between them? It hadn't anything to do with the pistol, Jenny could not know about that, which was the foremost thing in my mind. I had had a very good reason for stowing the thing away as I did, but now that it had disappeared I felt I had done a mad thing in keeping it; I ought to have buried it or dropped it down the well.

And Jenny, as if there were not perils enough for her already, was up against it in Elaine's room, probably being bullied out of her senses. On top of that, the thought of what she might have to go through later, maddened me. All because I had been too much of a coward to interfere between the two girls.

I started back for the stairs, determined to tackle it, and just then I heard the door above open, and one of them coming down. I halted for a moment and drew back a little way to make sure which of them it was. Jenny's slim little form appeared, crossing the hall, walking slowly, her head bowed; she didn't see me, and as the light fell on her face I saw she had been crying. . . . That finished me, I went over to her in three strides and opened the gun-room door.

"Jenny," I said, "come in here." She looked up at me, startled, but she seemed glad of any refuge, she went into the room and I faced her.

"There's something I must say to you; it's this. You're being made miserable here. I can't bear to see it. I'm not going to stand by and look on at it any longer. You were never meant for unhappiness like this."

"How do you know I'm unhappy, Ken?"

"How do I know! Do you think I can't see it, and feel it in every nerve—do you suppose I'm blind?"

"Perhaps I'm only—frightened."

"You're not frightened—I don't believe you've ever been frightened, so much as wretched and worried, treated the way you are. And all this mystery and danger tangling you and getting hold of you; I'm going to finish it!"

"Ah, I wish you could!" she said, and then, hurriedly, "but it can't be done; you've been so good to me, Ken—to us both—but don't you see—" she hesitated, "all this, is outside you . . . it—it isn't your affair."

"It *is* my affair!" I said.

And then everything went by the board. It was like no declaration I ever heard or read of; I suppose these things oughtn't to happen like an explosion.

"It's my affair because I love you, there's no one else on earth I care for or ever shall; Jenny, darling . . . I want the right to look after you, and I'm going to take it."

"Ken!" she gasped, "stop . . . please . . .!"

But I saw the look in her eyes that I'd never dared to hope for and I knew I was right at last; it sent me off my head, and though she tried to stop me I caught her like the rough I was and held her close.

"Jenny, beloved . . . you do care! Say you love me . . . say it! say it! and let everything else go."

And that is what she did. She clung to me like a child,

her arm about my neck, and lifted her face to mine in surrender.

"Ken!" she whispered, "Ken!" and our lips met. . . .

The delirious happiness of that moment. I could have blessed every incident, every intruder from Begbie and Linke downwards, that led up to this. Nothing mattered in the world, but the love that was between us two. Certainly not the thing that happened next.

I saw something that made me lift my head for a second. There was Elaine herself, standing on the threshold. Motionless as a statue for a moment or two; her eyes queer and luminous, the light shining full on her face, her lips smiling oddly; she drew back without a word and was gone.

Much I cared who saw us, this was our affair, not Elaine's. But Jenny slipped out of my arms and swiftly as a squirrel, backed away from me. Her face had changed. I looked at her in wonder and anxiety. Why should she care—now?

"Ken—don't!" she said, as I came after her, "oh, my dear—my dear—I should never have let you. You don't know what you've done. . . ."

"The best thing in my life," I said, closing the door quickly and coming back to her, "about the only good thing so far. Jenny, dearest little girl on earth, what's the matter! Elaine isn't in this. Nothing more about Elaine—Elaine's fine, but we don't want to hear of her now; Ken and Jenny; Jenny and Ken—get that by heart, and now come here and tell me again. You've made me just mad with happiness."

"I was mad to let you . . . not now, Ken . . . not yet! Nothing can come of it!" she said wildly, "it isn't possible. You don't understand. . . ."

"Now stop telling me I don't understand darling; all that's done with," said I, "I'm going to understand this thing down to rock bottom. As for nothing coming of it,

you've told me you love me and all's said. I'll let nothing on earth stand between us!"

I had both her hands and was drawing her to me, but her face was turned to the closed door with the strangest look, and I felt her tremble as she held back.

"You don't know what you're saying!" she whispered " . . . and Elaine. What is she doing? Ken, I don't think I've been frightened before, but now . . . I'm terrified. There's something . . . something happening. . . ."

"What can be happening?" I said, and tried to laugh. It was not a success. Suddenly the fear that she felt passed to me and got hold of me. I couldn't have put a name to it; an indefinable dread. There was silence for a few moments, silence so complete that without it I don't think either of us would have heard that faint, muffled crack like the distant snap of a whip, somewhere away off down the passage. A single shot, the report of an automatic—the silence again. It set every nerve in me jangling, and I saw the terror in Jenny's eyes.

"Stay here. Don't move—don't leave this room!" I said, and ran out, swinging the door to.

The hall was quiet and empty, the house seemed deserted.

"Elaine!" I cried.

Not a sound. The noise had seemed to come from somewhere to the right, down the unlit east corridor. I ran along it and flung open the door of the long gallery. The place was in darkness and I clicked on the lights—nothing there. Out into the passage and to the left again. . . . I saw a gleam of light under the door of the morning-room, opened it and pulled up short on the threshold.

An acrid smell of powder hung faintly in the close air, yet for a moment the room seemed untenanted. The wall lights on one side were turned on; both windows were closed, the large one and the little casement in the recess by

the fireplace. Then, in the shadow cast by the table with its heavy dark covering Elaine lay at full length . . . the glitter of the ring on the little hand that lay outstretched, so white against the carpet, and close by it a small black Wesson pistol—her own pistol. The wound in her temple under the wave of bright brown hair . . . the red stain where her head rested. . . .

I ran to her and kneeled, raising her shoulders, calling her wildly by name; for a moment her eyes opened slightly, half conscious and unseeing, but they met mine, and closed. Her head dropped back, she grew so cold . . . so cold, and everything went black around me.

How could I ever have dreamed of this, or for an instant have thought it possible? How could any man dare let himself imagine such a thing? The life that she had taken—I would have given mine ten times over to have prevented this.

I could even feel and understand what she had done, for in the agony of that moment of realisation I had a blind impulse to snatch up that accursed little black weapon that lay ready to my hand and turn it on myself and finish everything . . . rather than meet all this and answer for it. It was so easy, and so quick. But that wouldn't give her life . . . and it would shield no one but me.

I rose up unsteadily and saw the door was swung wide; Jenny's hand was holding it open, Jenny stood there looking . . . staring past me at Elaine where she lay in the shadow. I saw her sway blindly and had only time to catch her before she fainted.

INSPECTOR PALKE

I LIFTED her out, and the door of that fearful room swung slowly behind me with a click, as if some unseen hand had closed it. Jenny lay unconscious in my arms . . . I carried her into the gun-room and laid her on the couch, left her there and darted across to the library, nearly running into the house-keeper, who was just coming in through the service door.

"My father!" I cried, "where is he?"

Instead of answering she turned a red, shiny face to me, panting heavily; the fringe under her cap was wet with rain. The woman seemed stupefied. My face and voice might well have frightened her. She was staring at my hands.

"His lordship, sir? I don't think he's in the house. He——"

"Find him!" I said savagely, and shutting myself in the library, flew to the telephone. The emergency call went through to Tilden instantly, and it must have been less than a minute after I left the morning-room when the reply came through; a woman's voice.

"Dr. Tilden just leaving in his car, sir—if it's urgent I'll try and stop him."

"You *must* stop him! It's life and death. Call him back!"

Tilden's voice reached me. While I waited I noticed for the first time that there was blood on my raised hand and I shifted the receiver quickly into the other. Always, however hopeless one knows it to be, some gleam of hope awakens at the very name of a doctor; it is the healer to whom one flies first, not to the law. I blurted half a dozen words into the 'phone, such facts as he needed and as I was able to give him.

"Get to your car and drive like hell! Yes . . . through the temple . . . I don't know . . ." I said huskily. "Here—Tilden—is there anything I should do before you come?"

"No! The less you meddle the better—I'll be there right away."

A click as the line was cut; I jerked the hook and called again, sending the emergency summons through to the police. I knew I should have called them first. What could a doctor say, except that awful, stereotyped phrase they use in reports? The exchange operator seemed asleep. Then a deep bass voice rasped in my ear; the station-sergeant.

"Stanways—a woman shot. Is Begbie there? Get him to the 'phone—quick man, quick!" I cried.

Begbie—the last man on earth I had ever wanted to see again. And the summons had to come from me. Everything must come out—everything. We had done with concealment, all of us. It seemed an eternity before he reached the 'phone.

"Rolfe speaking . . . that you, Begbie? . . . Come over at once . . . Miss Corbyn . . . shot. . . ."

The receiver jerked and buzzed in my ear, maddeningly. I couldn't hear Begbie's reply.

"Don't talk, man—get here!" I said, "I can't tell you over the wire. Yes . . . Tilden's on the way."

"Hold on!" said Begbie, and I heard him calling out a name I didn't know, and muffled sounds of activity at the other end of the wire. In a few moments Begbie's voice snapped back at me.

"Stand by—don't leave the place. Be sure you're there when I come, and touch nothing—get me!"

The receiver clicked like a pistol shot, and I got on to my feet and went unsteadily out of the library. . . . Exerting all the will-power I had got left, I managed to pull myself together; it was no time to be showing weakness.

I heard a door slam somewhere, and a voice calling out—I did not know whose. But the hall was empty. I had to get back to that room. Back to the morning-room again. It

seemed darker than ever in the unlit passage. My hand shook as I hurriedly pushed open the door, which resisted, for it had one of those spring cylinder devices fixed on the inner side. It swung to behind me as I entered.

And there I stopped, stupefied, blinking in the glow of the light. I was alone in that room. It had no other tenant, living or dead.

The body was gone!

For a moment or two it seemed to me that the whole dreadful incident was an illusion; that it had never happened at all, that this was a nightmare. Elaine was gone. The damp night wind, blowing in through the open window, roused me.

But the relief that rouses a man from an evil dream was not mine. For the pile of the carpet was still red and wet where her head had lain; near by, just where it had been left, was the Wesson—Elaine's pistol—the same that for a week past had been locked in my desk, with the lightish scratch along the dark iron of the butt.

The window, that had been shut when I first came in, was wide open; the sash was up as high as it would go. A light rain was beating in, the floor was flecked with stains of mud and gravel, I could feel the little stones gritting under my feet as I stood.

I ran to the window and vaulted out. Whoever had been into that room since I left, I might be hard on their heels yet. What devil's work they were after I couldn't guess, nor was there time for thought.

I stared through the darkness, listening and peering, and wondered for a moment if I were going insane, so ghastly and unreal did it all seem. There was not a sound but the soft whisper of the rain.

Then, as my eyes focussed to the gloom, I saw something

like a dim shape, moving slowly and clumsily, out against the sky-line in the park, beyond the garden rails. I made for it as hard as I could pelt, vaulting the fence and running up the slope towards it. Away it went at a quickened pace, and I raised a yell and was after it in full pursuit, crazy to get to grips with something; till I found it out-distancing me, heard a snort and a beating of hoofs—I pulled up short, cursing myself for a fool. I had been chasing one of the park ponies.

Away ahead of me to the left, three hundred yards distant in a line from the morning-room window, was a dark belt of firs on the edge of the park, bordering a narrow lane that led away to the main road. Was it fancy, or did I see a spark of light moving there? Off I went again. It would be just the place for anyone to conceal a car, if they were reconnoitring the east side of Stanways by night and expecting to make a getaway in a hurry if necessary.

If so, they had made it, and probably some time before I quitted the house at all, for when I reached the belt there was nothing. But I had a petrol pipe-lighter with me, and by the dim flare it gave I searched over the ground, and sure enough right beside me on the edge of the belt by the lane were the fresh marks of tyres printed deep, where a heavy car had rested, and the spirts of soil thrown up when she had started away. The tracks led off down the lane, the lighter blew out, and I could not follow them further.

I ran to the end of the belt and listened. Certainly I could hear a car; a very low, deep, distant hum. But it was somewhere away on the other side of Stanways, it was receding and fading, evidently a high-power machine going at speed.

Straight ahead, in the right direction for a car making away from the place where I stood, the glow of powerful headlights were visible, but fully a mile off and approaching Stanways, not leaving it. Beyond this the distant glare of a second pair of lights; two cars, coming my way as hard

as they could burn the ground. Tilden and the police, of course. . . .

Useless, my groping here in the dark. I hurried back to the house to face the thing as best I might, my temples throbbing and my throat dry and constricted. What had the intruder done—The Unknown, who had butted into my trouble—and why? How would it profit them? No one who was sane would take any such risk, except for reasons that were vital and deadly.

I reached the open window again, having senses enough left to skirt round it avoiding any tracks there might be, and started to climb in at the side. The Wesson pistol on the carpet was the first thing that caught my eye; an impulse seized me, an overpowering temptation to snatch the thing up and make away with it—to be rid of it. I stamped that idea down. No more concealment. The truth——

I had got to leave that room untouched. I dropped back off the sill and went in through the side door to the gun-room. Jenny, white and dishevelled, was on the sofa. Her senses were returning; she looked at me blankly and tried to raise herself. I dropped on my knees beside her and took her by the hands.

"Just lie there, dear—don't move. It's coming right—it's not so bad." I hardly knew what I said. "Not near so bad."

"Ken . . . is she . . .?"

"She's gone—gone clear away," I said quickly, "that's all I know."

I heard her breath catch, and her head sank back. I cursed myself for a fool; I had tried to make things better, to quiet her any way I could, and indeed for a moment I thought I saw relief in her eyes, and hope. Then she shivered and collapsed; the senses went out of her like the puff of a candle . . . she had been through enough to break a man down, let alone a girl. The whiteness of her face

terrified me; I laid her back on the cushions and sprang to my feet as I heard the squeal of brakes outside and the sound of tyres grinding along the gravel as a car pulled up hurriedly.

I was out through the hall and into the porch as quick as I ever moved yet, and caught Dr. Tilden with his hand on the bell and the other gripping a little black bag.

"This way," I said, pulling him in, "your patient's Miss Craddock."

"Craddock?" he exclaimed, "you told me Miss Corbyn."

I halted him at the gun-room door.

"Listen, Tilden, before you go in. I found Miss Corbyn . . . shot. Miss Craddock came in—she saw what had happened—I can't explain to you now, but she's completely collapsed. I carried her into this room and I rang you. When I got back Miss Corbyn was gone . . . someone had been into the room where she lay. Don't interrupt me, man—I'm not raving, I'm telling you facts. It was her I called you to see, and she's gone. Now see to Miss Craddock; she's in a fearful state."

Tilden looked at me sideways as I turned the door handle.

"A damned queer story, Rolfe," he said, "but I'm here professionally, take me to my patient. Police rung yet?"

"Expecting them here every moment."

We found poor little Jenny lying limp as a rag on the sofa; she didn't stir when we entered, her eyes were closed, she scarcely seemed to be breathing. Tilden bent over her, looked at her quickly; his finger was on her pulse. . . . I watched his face, and was sorry I had been rough with him. The comfort a doctor is, at such a time. . . .

"Shock," he said. "She's all in. Yes—better later, got to be kept very quiet awhile. Want her out of this at once—where's her room?"

I lifted her in my arms and ran upstairs with her. Jenny's was the small spare room on the near side of Elaine's. The relief it was, to get her into that little refuge as quickly

as possible and lay her at length on the eiderdown; her face was whiter than the pillow.

"Hefty big lout you are, Rolfe," said Tilden, opening his bag, "sooner she's in bed the better—send a woman up here to attend to her."

"Tilden, you won't let her talk about things—you won't ask her questions—to-night?" I said as I made for the door.

"Of course not, you fool!" replied Tilden. I hurried downstairs and nearly ran into Mrs. Jessop at the foot, wearing a soaked hat and a steaming raincoat.

"Go up to Miss Craddock's room," I said, "Dr. Tilden's there—take his orders."

"I was going to tell you, sir," said Mrs. Jessop, who for the first time in my experience of her was looking pallid and flustered, "that his lordship——"

"Go!" I said, "upstairs with you," and threw both wings of the front door open. The headlights of a big car were sweeping up the drive; it pulled up with a jerk and the burly uniformed figure of Inspector Begbie shot out, followed by a man I had never seen before, in a long tweed overcoat. The pair of them stepped quickly through into the hall.

"Take us to the room, Rolfe," said Begbie abruptly. "This," he added, "is Inspector Palke, C.I.D.—from the Yard."

"Engaged in the Linke case—with the aid of my good friend, Inspector Begbie," said the other, with a little bow to me, and a rather attractive smile. He was a man of about fifty-five, long and gaunt, a head taller than Begbie, with short hair, iron-grey at the temples, and thoughtful penetrating eyes. His voice was low-pitched and gentle. He looked at me with the air of a collector who finds a rare and unusual specimen that he has long been seeking. His eyes travelled over me and dwelled for a moment on my right hand, flecked with that dry red stain.

THE BULLET

I DON'T know whether it was fear that I felt; it was rather a sort of paralysis, that held me dumb before the two men. While I was looking after Jenny and getting her out of the way I could think of nothing else . . . the rest of it had been blotted out and thrust into the background of whatever intelligence I've got; now it all came back like a flood tide—the thing I had to face and account for.

Inspector Palke seemed in no hurry. Begbie's face was grim and impatient, but they both peered at me in silence, waiting for me to speak. I just beckoned to them and led the way to the morning-room.

"Gone!" I said. "Taken away. She lay—*there*. I was in the gun-room . . . heard a shot . . . I thought it was a shot . . . it couldn't have been more than a minute or two before I got here. Miss Corbyn lay on the floor, unconscious, wounded in the forehead . . . the right temple. This is where she lay . . . her head here . . . the pistol close to her—it hasn't been moved. No one else in the room. The window—*shut?*"

"I believed . . . she was dying, her eyes opened slightly when I raised her, she couldn't speak. I got to the 'phone in the library, rang Dr. Tilden, and the police. I returned here as quickly as I could—not ten minutes later, just the time it took to ring you. She was gone . . . and the window wide open, as it is now."

"Stop a moment, Mr. Rolfe," said Begbie, peering round him in that slow, deliberate way of his, "haven't you left something out? Who else has been in this room, besides you—before you got back, I mean?"

"Yes, Miss Craddock, she came in after I did. When she

saw what had happened she fainted . . . I carried her out, and got to the 'phone; Tilden's here, he's with her now. I was telling you when I found—the body gone . . . and all that gravel on the carpet, I went out through the window and over the lawn fence—I couldn't see or hear a thing, but out in that fir belt by the lane there are fresh tyre marks, a car has stood there—and I heard a car moving on the far side of the park——”

“You have been very active, Mr. Rolfe,” said Palke. He had a quick, bird-like trick of shifting his gaze from one object to another as he drifted rapidly round the room; at the moment he had his back to me and was facing the mantelpiece; “yes, evidently a man of action. I suppose you can't put a time to all this—it didn't occur to you to look at the clock?”

“No!”

“It might have made some difference to you if you had,” said Palke, and turning away he dropped on one knee beside the pistol, took a scrap of chalk from his pocket and traced an outline round it on the carpet, draped a silk handkerchief round his hand and picked up the Wesson, holding it gingerly by the barrel, and examined it. I could hardly bring myself to look at him while he did so, the very sight of the little gun sickened me, but he hardly seemed to spend more than a moment over it; he laid it down again within the chalked outline on the floor, stepped over to the door, locked it and put the key in his pocket.

“Among your many activities, Mr. Rolfe, you hustled in and out again through that window—right through the middle and over the top of everything outside, I suppose?” he said to me as he made for the open sash.

“No—I jumped out at the side as it happens—and I came back by way of the side door.”

“You have flashes of intelligence after all,” said Palke,

climbing quickly out on to the gravel path. "Just stay right where you are, please. Come on, Begbie."

I stayed where I was. I saw the rays from a couple of electric torches playing rapidly over the ground and across the sodden lawn. One of the little circles of light stayed close at hand, moving to and fro; searching for footprints, of course—the other travelled a long way out, beyond the garden and into the park. Doubtless the pair were reading from the wet ground messages that were hidden from me.

I was interrupted by the sudden return of Inspector Palke, who swung his gaunt body and long legs in through the window, darted to the door, and unlocked it in a twinkling. I never saw such a change in a man. Those meditative eyes of his shone like the eyes of a cat that sees the rat's whiskers begin to emerge from the watched hole. He caught me by the arm.

"Your 'phone—get me to it quick!" he said.

I hurried out with him across the hall and into the library; as we entered the telephone on my father's writing-table began to buzz, as 'phones generally do when you want to send an urgent call yourself. He snatched the receiver.

"Stanways Hall—who's speaking?" he said abruptly. I was standing by, but he lowered the receiver for a moment, covering the mouthpiece with his hand, and turned to me.

"Get out of here please—go back to Begbie. Answer what questions he asks you till I come. And, Mr. Rolfe," he added with a grim smile as I reached the door, "take a word of advice—don't keep any more cards up your sleeve—it's too late for secrecy."

I found Begbie in the morning-room, busy about something by the fireplace. He locked the door again as soon as I was inside.

"We want no interruptions here," he said; "now, Mr. Rolfe—about this pistol. Before we start, do you understand

that it's no use trying to keep anything back, for you'll only waste time?"

"I'm here to tell you every last thing I know."

"Have you seen that pistol before?"

"I've had it in my possession a week. It was locked in my desk; I looked for it this evening, and missed it——"

"Whose is it?"

"Miss Corbyn's."

"You're sure of that? Can you recognise it as hers?"

"Yes."

"How did you come by it?"

"I took it away from her—six days ago. I——"

"All right—that's all I want to know about the gun. When did you last see Miss Corbyn, before this thing happened?"

"In the gun-room, up the passage. Almost immediately before . . . a few minutes——"

"Were you alone?"

"Miss Craddock was with me. Miss Corbyn looked in . . . and went out again . . ."

"Went out again? What did she come for? Did she say anything to you?"

He watched me narrowly as he spoke.

"She said . . . nothing. Went out, and a minute or two later——"

"Leaving you alone with Miss Craddock?" interrupted Begbie.

"I felt that if this man went on questioning me I should get my hands on his thick neck and strangle him. I couldn't keep my voice steady as I answered.

"Yes. I heard a shot . . . at least I thought it sounded like a shot . . . traced it to this room, and I found——"

I told him what I found. He didn't spare me anything.

There is a Chinese torture called the 'death by a thousand cuts.' I would give myself up to the executioner rather than

go through that time again. And he asked me about the wound.

"Don't you see how vital this is, Mr. Rolfe," he persisted, "can't you say whether she was dead or living when you left her? You were the first to find her and the last to see her. From what you actually saw, can you form any opinion how, and from what direction, that shot was fired?"

"Good heavens, man, why ask me that. Can't you see for yourself how it was?"

"Yes, I think I can, but I deal in facts, not guesses—I must have what help I can get from you."

"You are very upset, which is natural; you have had the shock of a lifetime, but please pull yourself together. You tell me that the body—that Miss Corbyn lay here, her right hand outstretched, close by the pistol. But that does not show where she was standing before she fell; she must have been rather more to the left, which would account for the deflexion of the shot. Do you see this?"

He pointed to the clock on the mantel; it had a heavy marble base and a black dial with luminous figures. Not until now did I realise that it was not going; that its hearty sonorous tick was silent. Begbie's stubby finger pointed to a small ragged hole at the base of the dial where the figure VI should have been. It was not very noticeable on the black enamel of the face unless one looked close. The hands of the clock were undamaged and marked the time as thirteen minutes past nine.

"The bullet that did the mischief," said Begbie, "it finished here. These automatics have great penetration at short range." He swung the clock round and opened the back, showing me the wrecked works, where a distorted little 33 bullet had churned up the brass cog-wheels and lodged in the mainspring. "That's clear enough. Are you clear that you only heard one shot?"

"Of course—one shot."

"There's no 'of course' about it—if it's sure this was the only one, then I've got the direction and can fix where she was standing . . . and that's worth all your evidence put together."

"Then for pity's sake let me alone!" I said. "How can it matter . . . where she was when she fired——"

Begbie stared at me in that sardonic way of his, with a touch of surprise. His face seemed to be looming at me out of a red mist.

"When *she* fired?" he said. "What's the matter with you, Mr. Rolfe? . . . No—no," he continued quickly, "I see—I see. Natural you should think it was that, the way you found things here, and it may have been intended that you should. But surely you haven't still got that idea in your head—see here!"

He took up the Wesson by its barrel and opened the butt, taking out the metal charger clip. All the nine shells in it were intact, the nickel bullets in an even row, and the light glinted along the clean rifling of the barrel through the open breech. The Wesson—Elaine's little gun—had not been fired at all.

An overpowering sense of relief came over me as I looked at the thing. The blood rushed to my face as I realised what a monumental fool I had been—and yet what else could I possibly have thought?

"Mr. Rolfe," said Begbie, "I'd have shown you earlier, but it never occurred to me you weren't on to it. Miss Corbyn, finding herself suddenly in danger, tried to defend herself with this automatic, and was not quick enough. She was shot from outside that window, although you say you found it closed when you came in. Who shot her and how was she removed?—those are the questions we're out to solve now."

"I think we shall get that far," broke in Inspector Palke;

his face appeared for a moment at the open window. "Things are a little better than I looked for. Unlock the door Begbie, and I'll come round. I don't want to make this place in a worse mess than it is."

I was perfectly dazed with conflicting emotions, trying to collect my thoughts and get a grip of things when Palke came in. He glanced at me, laid a sympathetic hand on my shoulder, and pressed me back into a chair.

"A bad time for you, Mr. Rolfe. Sit there a minute while I talk to Begbie—I shall want you again."

The two of them retired to the other end of the room by the fireplace and conferred in undertones; I suppose Begbie was telling his colleague briefly what I had said, I saw Palke glance back at me once or twice; he said something to Begbie that I couldn't catch, but when he came across to me again my spirits had risen like mercury. The relief and reaction from that black horror that had oppressed me were intense; I could have gripped Begbie by the hand and blessed him. Though I couldn't see a yard further through the cloud of mystery and tragedy that was its climax I felt things were not so bad and there was hope . . . Palke had said so, and the man had got my confidence from the start.

"Well, we've got things going. And I'll light up this case for you as far as I can and as briefly, for I want you to understand it, Mr. Rolfe, and I shall require your help," he said, "but first you've got to come across with your story, right up to to-night—and don't keep anything back. Quick as you can!"

I was long past keeping anything back. I started to tell him of the drive from Euston and the crash on the Cranwell Road, but he broke in——

"We know as much as we need to about that," he said shortly, "what trouble have you had here since then?"

I told him of the mysterious skulker who had stalked the

house and peered in through the gun-room window, and all that followed afterwards. He listened intently, making no comment.

"Would you know that man again if you saw him?" he asked as I finished.

"Yes, I would—though it was a very brief glimpse I got. Certainly I never saw him before nor since."

"You mean you think you've never seen him before or since," replied Palke. "All right—that'll do for the present. You may see him again I hope. Now please follow this. Come to the window.

"You found it closed. But it must either have been open when Miss Corbyn first entered the room or—very possibly—she opened it herself. All that is sure is that the shot was fired at her from outside, and whoever fired it was close up against the open window with pistol hand extending through into the room; you say you noticed the smell of powder smoke still hanging, when you entered. He meant making a certainty of that shot.

"Miss Corbyn was standing well inside the room. She saw her assailant, but she couldn't have stood much chance of defence or escape. Here is where he stood when he fired."

Between the window and the gravel path was a flower-border three feet wide, bare winter soil with a few trampled plants and moist with rain. Palke leaned over the sill and flashed his torch on the ground close to our right-hand side of the window. A single footprint was visible there, the mark of a heavy short boot, rather deeply impressed, its outline already melting in the wet, about eighteen inches from the wall.

"See that?" said Palke, "his left foot forward, his weight thrown upon it pressing the fore part of the boot hard down—heel impression slight—right foot was back on the gravel. He was crouching slightly when he fired, bullet did its work,

then deflected—angle uncertain—and hit the clock. Miss Corbyn fell, and didn't move again. All that took barely a few seconds. From the direction, it's pretty sure that from this side the shot was fired—and there stood your gunman."

"Then he—I say 'he,' but that man wasn't alone—pulled the window-sash down before quitting. Likely he may have heard you coming; you seem to have been fairly quick on the job. And off with him into the night and the rain."

"You say there was more than one?"

"Look," said Palke. "Here was the other." He passed to the opposite side of the window and flashed his torch over the border again. Close to the house, a little back from the window's edge as if someone had crouched there on the watch, was a trample of confused footmarks huddled together, only two of them standing out fairly clear. I peered down at them and uttered an exclamation. They were much smaller than the solitary print on the farther side, they had been made by thickish walking shoes, rounded at the toes; the size couldn't have been more than fives.

"Those are a woman's footprints!"

Palke nodded.

"Strange, isn't it? A woman stood there. And she was there before you arrived. What woman, Mr. Rolfe?"

THE THREE TRAILS

CRUSOE'S discovery of the footprint in the sand couldn't have shaken him more than those ooze shoe-marks affected me. They were not Elaine's, she had worn high-heeled evening shoes, nowhere near that size.

"Certainly not Miss Corbyn," said Palke. "But who? I see that beats you. It beats Inspector Begbie. But the thing's boiling itself down. There was a woman in Black Spinney on the night your man Linke came by his end. That's news to you? It was news to me till I came into this case recently. Begbie established that fact, and very well he did it. Same woman, Begbie?"

"Very little to swear by, then or now," returned Begbie gloomily. "Don't know who the woman was."

"Woman—timid, tender woman—sometimes she's tougher than the male, and then she gives a lot of trouble. I've been beaten by women several times in my service, for a while—I got them all in the end. I think we might get this one."

"It's fairly certain she must have been there when the shot was fired. It came from the left side; the direction of it shows us that. She was over here to the right of the window, crouching against the wall. It was the man who did the job. There they were, the pair of them. Number One to the left—the man. Number Two to the right—the woman. As soon as the shot was fired, and the window pulled down, they made their getaway."

"The object of the man who fired that shot was of course plain murder; Miss Corbyn was a wealthy woman, there is someone or it may be several who would benefit by her death. Why or how is uncertain, we should know that pretty soon;

I think we shall get on to it to-night. They were away, of course, before you arrived."

"But they came back!"

Palke shook his head.

"No. Now we come to Number Three. Neither of that pair ever came into the room. Look here."

He pointed to the muddy tracks on the carpet; I hadn't paid close attention to them till then. Those closest the window were the most clearly marked, they were quite different to the tracks we had been inspecting outside. Their owner had worn long and rather narrow boots—or maybe shoes—somewhat pointed.

"And here," said Palke, flashing his torch outside.

In the centre of the flower-bed, clear of the other tracks at the sides, one could see where those narrow boots had come in and gone out again, over the window-sill. And on their outward journey they were more deeply printed in the soft soil, the heels jammed down, as if their owner had carried a heavy weight and moved quickly. Strange how easily one read the story when Palke interpreted it; I doubt I should have looked a long time at that jumble of muddy prints before sorting them out, and then probably got it wrong end first.

"You see? Here came Number Three. While you were away telephoning—for you left her there with the pistol lying beside her—Number Three got in and was quick about the job, finished it, carried Miss Corbyn out—carried her out! And took her—where? Got clear away with his burden, before ever you turned up again, or the police arrived. A fairly hefty fellow; for it was done single-handed. Yes, that man was quick!"

"Then there were three in the gang!"

"If he was one of them—working with them. But was he? Or was he—more likely still—playing for his own hand?"

Someone whose interest it was that nobody should know until he chose, whether Elaine Corbyn was dead or living. And a mighty strong interest it must have been. A man would have to have a powerful motive, to meddle like that in a job that might hang him. Perhaps, Mr. Rolfe, a bigger crook than either of them. Who was he?"

Palke looked at me with a queer, suggestive gleam in those not unfriendly grey eyes of his, as though he were reckoning me up; judging how much, if anything, I knew or guessed.

"Why ask me! I can no more see through his motive, nor guess who he was, than the dead."

"I see that you don't, Mr. Rolfe. Yes, he's an elusive gentleman, this," said Palke quietly, "he's beaten the lot of us!"

"There's hope then—it can't be as bad as we thought or he would never have meddled!" I cried; "that's as plain as sunlight."

Palke was silent a moment.

"I wish it were as plain as you think," he said, "just come outside a minute. We'll take one last scout round to see if there's anything I've overlooked."

I swung myself out through the window and lit clear of the border with my feet on the gravel path; just as I had done before, only that time I must have done it unconsciously with the impetus of haste and a pair of long legs—it was lucky I didn't trample over those tell-tale tracks in the flower-bed. Palke turned his torch on them.

"Now, here go the woman's tracks, beyond the gravel path and across the lawn. You can see where her heels broke down the edge; that was on her outward journey after the job was done—and here go the gunman's marks too; they're very faint on the wet grass and getting fainter, but you can pick them up again yonder at the wicket-gate into the park. The woman's go as far as that also. Park turf too rough for

tracks and night too wet, but I found the gunman's again in the little fir wood yonder where the tyre marks are—you saved me some time on that job, Mr. Rolfe. That car was waiting for him; that's how he quit. Did he take the woman with him? Or did she turn back at the wicket-gate? Beyond that I can't trace her with any certainty, it's possible she did reach the car. You'd expect her to. But you might be wrong. Leave her at that; we'll get her soon or later—with luck."

"Now to Number Three, the gentleman wearing long shoes and bearing a weight no man could carry far . . . here are his tracks, muddy on the gravel for a few yards, but what way do they go? Not on to the grass at all. In fact they seem to fade out altogether. Give Mr. Rolfe your torch, Begbie. You know the grounds about your own house, sir, you're young and have keen eyes, though they're not trained. Can you make out the way he went?"

By the light of Begbie's torch I picked up the long boot marks where they turned to the right on the path. The tracks of mould from the flower-bed soon failed and the drizzle was hardening into a pelting rain. Following the direction quickly along the path by the side of the house I lit on tracks again, nearly getting past before I spotted them, just to the left and deeply stamped into the lawn.

"He staggered on to the grass here," I said, "three—four of his footprints, one of them skidded and three of them sideways. And back on to the path again."

"Good for you!" said Palke approvingly; "here he staggered; even you might have staggered if you carried what he did and were winded with running."

I could have carried Elaine half a mile without doing any staggering, winded or not; it occurred to me the Unknown was scarcely the hefty fellow Palke suggested, and not in the prime of life at that. I pressed on along the path rapidly; there

were no more tracks up to the point where it ended in a chained gate, that would have taken some climbing and barred the way that led round to the main drive fronting the house. Impossible that he could have taken that direction; he must have turned somewhere. I tried back to the lawn before the open window where Palke had pointed out the tracks of the retreating gunman.

I was so bucked with my skill in tracking and the renewal of hope arising out of what had looked like black tragedy, that I gave a cry of triumph on spotting what both of them had missed—a trail of long shoe marks leading across the softest part of the lane away in the direction of the park and the fir grove.

"Here he is! And going the same way as the gunman after all—right out to where the car was. That's your man, and ——" I bent and scanned the tracks closer. "He must have got rid of his burden too, no heel marks—he was moving on tip-toe!"

The light from the window shone on Palke's face and it wore a pitying smile, diluted with humour.

"You're sure he wasn't walking on his hands and waving his feet at the gunman, Mr. Rolfe?" he said; "no, that Smart Alec didn't walk on tip-toe and it wouldn't suit him; he was merely running just as hard as he could pelt, and not doing much thinking. Fit the ball of your shoe into those tracks."

I didn't need to—only too obvious what tracks they were.

"It was me!" I said, crestfallen.

"Sure," replied Palke soothingly.

Evidently reading trails wasn't my long suit, though I've done some of it in my time. I had forgotten that first dash out of mine across the lawn. I turned to Palke in exasperation.

"What did you bring me out here for! Just to pull my leg?"

"Far from it, Mr. Rolfe," said Palke imperturbably, "I'm here to collect all the clues I can, you have given me con-

siderable help. Damn this rain, it's going to wipe everything out. In another half-hour there'll be nothing left."

He led the way in through the back door, as if the place belonged to him, and as we entered I saw Mrs. Jessop flit across the end of the passage into the hall.

"Who's that?" asked Palke quickly.

"The housekeeper, Mrs. Jessop," replied Begbie.

"Ah, yes. I want to see her. Not yet though—take her into that room where the telephone is—the library—and wait till I come. Nobody is to go into the morning-room. That doctor's somewhere about, isn't he? I saw him up on the landing when I came out. If you hear him coming downstairs, stop him. I must see him before he leaves. Mr. Rolfe, you stay with me."

XXIX

MRS. JESSOP

PALKE had the key of the morning-room in his pocket. He led me in and closed the door carefully. He turned to me and paused for a moment. I had thought he was taking the whole thing much too calmly and callously; I suppose the police do get callous. But now that his face was in the light, his eyes belied him. There was a fighting gleam in them, but a worried, apprehensive look about him too.

"Look here," he said, "it's clear how that first pair made their getaway. There won't be many cars out to-night, and every one that's running within a fifty-mile circle is being stopped and examined—they may have been clicked already. I think they will; the cordon will take some getting through."

"But Elaine!" I said.

"Yes—but they were up against something deeper. Do you see your way through it? Naturally, you don't. And I've been all round the place, but there isn't a sign I can find to show what became of that man with the narrow boots. He may be thirty miles away; he may be within a mile of us—he may be here, in this house."

"Do you believe that?"

"I believe nothing that I can't prove. I'm just putting the possibilities to you. Mr. Rolfe, you are rather deeply dipped in this case yourself, and I'm taking you into my confidence so far as I can. The Commissioner gives me a free hand; my methods are a little unusual, and I'm going to put an unusual question to you. Are you on my side? Wholly and unreservedly on the side of the law—from now on?"

"Of course I'm on your side! What do you take me for? There's nothing I wouldn't do to get those devils laid by the heels."

"That's good. I may have to remind you of it. An ugly business. Incidentally your own position is an unpleasant one and may become more so; I feel a certain amount of sympathy for you, more perhaps than you suspect. But you may come out of it with credit yet, Mr. Rolfe."

"What on earth does my credit matter? Tell me how I can help you."

"By not breathing one word to anybody of what you know about this case; keep it locked up inside your skull, and your mouth tight shut. You've not told anyone—before I arrived?"

"Only Dr. Tilden."

"Indeed. What did you say to him?"

I told him.

"Not a word more to anyone, Mr. Rolfe; from this moment, not a syllable. Excepting of course Inspector Begbie; answer any question he puts to you. I have your word that you are on my side. And as this case proceeds, should you find yourself unable to go on helping me, you must stand aside and let the law take its course. That is a warning; and I cannot say more now."

"So long as you get that man——"

"Oh, we'll get him," said Inspector Palke, "we'll get him."

His confidence buoyed me up.

"And Miss Corbyn. Though I thought—I'll never believe she is dead. You say she—she may come through this safely yet?"

Palke looked disturbed. He turned away from me without answering, walked slowly across the room and back. Then he faced me and looked at me gravely and questioningly.

"I said nothing of the kind."

"Why. What *do* you believe?"

Inspector Palke's face was stony. His shoulders gave a scarcely perceptible shrug.

"Mr. Rolfe. I don't want to depress you unduly, but take this from me. In confidence, strictly between ourselves. Better for everyone concerned, if Elaine Corbyn is dead; better for herself. Better certainly for her companion, Miss Craddock. Better, I think, for you."

I stared at him, incapable of speech.

"That is all I dare tell you, at this stage. But so much, I must tell you, remember it is in strict confidence between ourselves; when this case is ended, you will understand."

His eyes became sympathetic as he looked at me.

"Surely Mr. Rolfe," he said gently, but with obvious surprise, "there was no attachment between you and—I mean——"

"No. None at all."

"I am glad to hear it—and forgive the question. I didn't want to give you pain. But Mr. Rolfe," he said, "do you really not understand . . . are you a little dense or is it only that you are upset? You've been with me here an hour, you have lived in the inner circle of this case, so to speak; you have been with Miss Corbyn here for some considerable time, and fairly intimate with her as a guest in your father's house—have you not formed some conclusion—shall we say a suspicion, concerning her and her affairs?"

"Intimate with her. She told me nothing about herself, nor of her affairs; she was a paying guest here. I couldn't press her to tell anything that she chose to keep to herself."

Palke nodded.

"I don't believe in the face of everything, that she is dead—I can't and won't believe it."

Palke looked at me and shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"Believe what you will, Mr. Rolfe, by all means, so long as you keep it to yourself. You have believed so many things that turned out not to be so."

He shut and bolted the window, drew the curtains care-

fully, and ushered me out of the room, locking the door behind us.

"Now I'm going to see that housekeeper of yours. Don't go away. I should like you to be with me if you please."

In the library we found Mrs. Jessop and Begbie. I looked at my father's housekeeper curiously. It would take a landslide to shake Mrs. Jessop's heavy Victorian calm, but she was shaken now, though she did her best not to show it. She was very pale and her eyes, usually dull, were watchful and alert.

XXX

LORD TRENT RETURNS

"A R O U G H night, Mrs. Jessop," said Palke, "and I see you've had the misfortune to be out in it, and have very wisely changed your shoes. Where did you do so?"

"My shoes, sir?" she said stupidly. "My shoes—I changed them because they were wet."

"I didn't say why, but where. It will save time if you tell me at once."

She stared at him, and hesitated.

"In the lobby next the service passage. What have my shoes got to do with——"

"All right, Mrs. Jessop." Palke nodded to Begbie, who left the room quietly. Mrs. Jessop peered at the visitor from Scotland Yard, her under lip trembling. Palke set a chair for her courteously.

"Inspector Begbie has told you who I am. Something very serious has happened, Mrs. Jessop. Will you tell me what took you out of the house, roughly between a quarter to nine and nine-twenty, and which way you went? I am putting the times to you, to save trouble."

"Mr. Rolfe told me to find his lordship—I was to find him at once. I thought he had gone out somewhere, and I put on my rain-cloak——"

"But before that? You came *in* at nine-twenty. That was when Mr. Rolfe gave you that order, surely? In what direction did you go when you left the house earlier?"

"I went down the park road to the west lodge . . . to see my son, who is the gatekeeper there."

"And did you see him?"

"No, sir. The lodge was dark, and nobody there. So I came back."

"Straight back?"

"Yes sir. . . ."

"About a quarter of a mile, isn't it? And Mr. Rolfe ordered you out again. Did you, either time, make your way to the west side of the house—near the morning-room or the gun-room?"

"No, sir."

"Quite sure of that?" said Palke. "And you were sent to find Lord Trent—if you could. Did you find him?"

"No, sir."

"You had no success at all. Have you any idea where Lord Trent is at present?"

"None at all, sir."

"Two fruitless errands?" said Palke.

She made no answer. There was a suppressed hostility in her manner, and it seemed to me that she was pretty badly frightened, though she gave no outward sign of it. She had replied to his questions coolly enough, but I felt a conviction that she was lying. Palke treated her quite gently, he had nothing of the bully in him. There was a queer little smile at the corners of his mouth, his eyes were hard and penetrating, and never left her face.

"Thank you, that will do for the present," he said, opening the door for her.

She stopped in the doorway and turned to him abruptly.

"What's the meaning of all this!" she cried. "Aren't I to be told what it's about? I——"

"I have too much on my hands at the moment, Mrs. Jessop," he replied. "Unless *you* can think of anything that might interest me."

She closed her thin lips and went out, her damp black silk gown rustling as she retreated down the hall.

"How long has that dame been with you?" said Palke to me.

"Ever since we came to Stanways. Good heavens man, you don't think——?"

"Never mind what I think. There's one curious point I'd like you to notice; everyone concerned in this case, everybody in any way connected with it—has got something to hide."

He looked at me with a challenging eye.

"You not least of them, Mr. Rolfe. But I will say, you've been comparatively frank with me. Yes; everyone with a secret of his or her own, vital or trivial, but linking right up with the case. Queer, isn't it? But here's your doctor coming down."

Tilden crossed the hall and entered the library, carrying his little black bag. He cast a suspicious glance at me.

"How is Miss Craddock, Doctor?" asked Palke.

"Shock. Severe mental shock," replied Tilden. "Poor girl . . . don't wonder. Can't make this business out. Had her put to bed—better to-morrow if she gets some rest; got to be kept quiet."

"Much may happen before to-morrow—is she well enough to see me now? Only for a minute," said Palke, "I have got to see her."

Tilden hesitated.

"If it's so urgent——"

"It is vital, Doctor. Tell her so. Ask her, please, if she will receive Inspector Palke of Scotland Yard."

Tilden returned upstairs. I was following him, when Palke stopped me and pushed the door to.

"Where are you going, Mr. Rolfe?"

"To Miss Craddock; and I will see her first."

"No, sir. I am going to see her myself before she receives anyone in this household. You can't claim right of precedence of the C.I.D. in a case of murder."

"Damn the C.I.D.," I said, "and don't talk to me of right;

I go to the girl I'm going to marry and all Scotland Yard isn't going to stop me."

"Gently, Mr. Rolfe. You are to marry Miss Craddock then—here's another thing you didn't tell me but left me to discover for myself. Now, will you tell me how long this has been fixed?"

"What the devil is that to you!" I said furiously. Then I checked myself. "No—you must know if you've got to. Why not? Since to-night, and in the gun-room—the time about nine o'clock. Does that satisfy you?"

"Quite," replied Palke with that gentle little smile of his, "we don't deal much with romance at the Yard, our business is mostly rather sordid." He laid a friendly hand on my arm. "Now, take a word of counsel from one who's sorry for a man that's had a very bad time and isn't nearly through it yet. Don't go near Miss Craddock till the morning. Stand down and let me see her in your place; it will be better for her—and safer."

"Very well," I said after a pause. "Have it your own way."

He nodded, and passed out. I dropped into a chair, only too glad to be alone. I had had just as much as I could stand. After all it was useless to oppose Palke in anything he chose to do—foolish perhaps, too.

I've no idea how long I sat there, trying to overtake events; it couldn't have been more than a few minutes before the door opened—I was expecting Palke, but it was Begbie who came in. He said nothing, but stood looking at me silently, and then began to move around the room, examining things that lay on the desk and tables. I thought he was going to question me, and was thankful when he didn't.

An idea was growing in my mind that hadn't occurred to me before; a suspicion that took hold of me and sealed my lips more effectively than any of Palke's hints and warnings about keeping silence. I believed that I understood why he

was sorry for me—if a C.I.D. official has time to be sorry for anybody. A moment or two later he returned.

"I've seen Miss Craddock," he said to me, "I may tell you I haven't upset her at all, didn't have to worry her much. She has answered a few questions I had to put to her, and though of course she's had a sad time of it Dr. Tilden says she'll be better in the morning and you can see her then. She was very anxious to hear about you; I told her that *you* were under no suspicion of any kind whatever and were quite free from blame—which was stretching the truth rather, but I think it did her at least as much good as the sleeping-draught Dr. Tilden's given her. Still, Miss Craddock is out of reach of any trouble whatever else may happen to-night. So try and get that off your mind."

"You're a good fellow," I said gratefully. "I'm sorry I lost my temper, but I've been through hell—I'll see Tilden before he goes. . . ."

"He's gone. That's his car leaving now. I want this house clear of everybody not connected with it." He turned to his colleague. "Well, Begbie?"

"Got the woman's shoes—tried them outside. Just the size, but the rain's made all tracks pretty nearly a wash-out," said Begbie.

Palke drew him over to the fireplace and they conversed a few moments in an undertone. I was not concerning myself about Mrs. Jessop, my thoughts led elsewhere. Not even Jenny's message—if one could call it that—comforted me for long. I could see the situation getting more deadly than ever, and the end approaching. Palke came across to me.

"I suppose, Mr. Rolfe," he said, "you've no idea where Lord Trent is? No? Never mind—won't trouble you any further." He moved to the door.

"Can't say—don't know when he'll be back," I said dully. I didn't even know whether he had taken the Chrysler.

"No? I think he'll turn up—the car is in the garage," said Palke, knotting the scarf round his throat.

"He often goes out at night—rather a habit—he may have gone to Brookfields," I said.

"Yes?" returned Palke, as if dismissing the subject! He nodded to his companion. "Begbie, it's time for me to quit; I've got to get the wires working. You stay on—you know just what I want done, and there's no man can do it better. Good night, Mr. Rolfe, I shall be seeing you again."

He went out abruptly; I heard his car buzzing away down the avenue. I was left alone with Begbie.

"A difficult case, sir; an ugly business," he said quietly. "But Inspector Palke is one of the ablest officers at the Yard, and we're working together—we shall straighten this thing out. You will understand, Mr. Rolfe, that in a case as tangled as this the police may have to take rather unusual measures. You'll make allowances, as we're doing for you."

He looked sorry for me. I could see sympathy even in the face of the sardonic Begbie.

"Do you want me any longer?" I said.

"Sorry, sir; just a little while yet."

I heard a step in the hall, and the library door opened. My father appeared, in a dripping Inverness cloak, his boots mud-stained and his face bleached and wet with the rain. He stopped short as he saw the Inspector standing beside me.

"You?" he said. "Again the inevitable Begbie. Have you been expecting me?"

THE WESSON PISTOL

BEGBIE closed the door.

"Do you know what has happened, Lord Trent?" he said.

"Something serious, I suppose, to bring you from your desk in such weather; I never saw a man look more worried," said my father coolly. "Your case is progressing?"

"Will you tell me——"

"Inspector Begbie," said my father. "Will *you* tell me first just what the trouble is, if any, and then you will find me in the mood to answer questions. Pray sit down."

Begbie's eyes narrowed, and he remained standing.

"I have to tell you, Lord Trent, that Miss Corbyn has been shot; and that she has disappeared out of the house since your son, who found her, went to ring for the police and Dr. Tilden."

My father stared at him as if turned to stone.

"And Miss Craddock! Was she——"

"Miss Craddock is upstairs in her room—and in no danger.

"And now Lord Trent," said Begbie, taking the chair that had been offered him, "I will give you the facts as shortly as I can, before I ask you to answer my questions."

He did so. I sat by while Begbie outlined the story briefly and formally; what he told or how much he left out I scarcely noticed for I was not listening to him; I was watching my father's face. It told me nothing. I never saw a man more completely master of himself. But that was his way in moments of crisis. He waited till Begbie had finished, and sat silent a moment or two.

"A dreadful business," he said. "And it was my son who summoned you so quickly—you were here within ten

minutes of its occurring. Go on, man! What now? Is that as far as you have got?"

"Not quite. I have to account for everybody who was outside to-night," said Begbie. "Immediately after the discovery, Lord Trent, your son sent the housekeeper out to look for you. She says she was unable to find you. You didn't see anything of her?"

"Oh, Mrs. Jessop? Nothing whatever."

"Then you confirm that she told me the truth?"

"I have always found Mrs. Jessop as truthful as most people, but I answer only for myself," said my father quietly. "It occurs to you that we might both be lying——?"

"Please don't put suggestions in my mouth, Lord Trent; I did not say so. I am collecting information to complete my case, and I would like you to tell me when you last saw Miss Corbyn, and what passed between you."

"When I last saw Miss Corbyn she was sitting in that chair which you occupy at present, and nothing passed between us except a cup of coffee which she poured out for me."

"What time was this?"

"About half-past eight. We had finished dinner early, and she was here alone with me. She was unusually silent; not that she was ever a great talker, and she seldom told me anything about her affairs. But to-night she scarcely answered when I spoke to her. A few minutes later she left me, and where she went I don't know."

"I was left alone, and for some time past I have had a distaste for being alone here in the evening; I got up and walked about the room; I felt restless and uneasy; I hardly know why, I opened the window. I heard the dog barking—my son's dog, down in the kennels by the south wing. The night was dark and slightly drizzly, but I got my hat and raincoat and went out."

"The dog gave the alarm then, and you thought there was someone about who ought not to be?"

"He gave no alarm, he's not that kind of dog, he is old and rather deaf. It is my son's business to exercise him and he was barking because he had been shut up all day. It is bad for man or dog to be shut up all day, and I let him out and took him for a walk. I went down the south road through the park—and I returned just now to be met with this ghastly news from you, Inspector Begbie, which is enough to upset any man's balance. But I fear that is all I can tell you, and surely you should get on to a line which will give you better results than I can."

"You changed your shoes, Lord Trent, before going out?"

"I did," said my father, looking down at his long mud-stained walking-boots. "I could hardly go in pumps, and you have not given me time to change back."

"I think I've got it now," said Begbie; "you left the house a little before nine and you've been away in a south direction for rather over an hour; your only reason was to take the dog for a walk."

"My chief reason," said my father, reaching for the cigars and lighting one with care; "you won't mind my smoking? If it doesn't seem heartless—it is composing when one has bad news. Yes, that was my reason. Will you have one yourself, Begbie?"

Begbie shook his head.

"I want to fix times, Lord Trent. When Mrs. Jessop was sent by your son to look for you it was nine-twenty. Can you tell me where you were at that time?"

"I can tell you exactly. Do you ever listen to chimes, Begbie? I heard the church bells chime the quarter just as I was passing the south lodge gates and on into the south lane."

"Did you see anybody there?"

"There's nobody to see; the south lodge is empty."

"I know it is, Lord Trent. You saw nobody, then, and nobody saw you. That is just a mile from here. Nine-fifteen. At nine-thirteen the shot was fired, in the morning-room, as I told you just now—as the clock told me. Your son's 'phone call came through to me at nine-twenty-five, and a minute or two later Miss Corbyn, dead or living, had disappeared. You were at the lodge and still walking south along the lane; how far did you go?"

"Another five minutes, maybe."

"Then at nine-twenty you must have been hard by Black Spinney."

"How well you know the Stanways geography, Begbie," said my father admiringly. "You certainly ought to by this time. Yes, at the time you mention I was by the stile at the head of Black Spinney, and I remained there another five minutes or more."

"Was no one there beside you?"

"Possibly the ghost of Linke," said my father, "but if so I didn't see it; I suppose I am not spiritual enough. You are going to ask me what the devil I was doing near Black Spinney on an unpleasant night like this, after a comfortable dinner? Let me assure you I was not drawn there by the impulse which is said to draw murderers back to the scene of their crime. A mystery rather than a crime, which I confess baffles me almost as much as it appears to do you."

"It may seem somewhat baffling, but it is becoming clearer as we proceed, Lord Trent," said Begbie.

They eyed each other as they spoke, Begbie grim and purposeful, my father perfectly at ease.

"I am glad to hear it, Inspector. It is an intense relief to me to know that this case is going to be straightened out by you, the most efficient officer in Hertfordshire, though perhaps the least tactful."

"And you were alone during the entire time of your absence from the house, Lord Trent?" pursued Begbie immovably. "Were you armed? And are you armed at the present moment?"

"Armed!" My father uncrossed his legs, and gazed at him. "Now why—my good Inspector, why do you ask me such a question?"

"Because you seem unable to sit quite comfortably in that chair. That's why I asked the question. Shall I ask it again?"

"No," said my father, "for I defy anybody to sit comfortably in thin evening trousers with one of these things at his back. I congratulate you on your gift of observation, and I am glad to be rid of it."

He reached behind him deliberately and pulled out a little automatic, which he handed to Begbie.

THE WILL

"**L O A D E D.** Be careful with the safety-catch," said my father. "Great penetration at short range—like yourself Begbie—but it couldn't carry a mile and a half."

"No Wesson would carry a mile and a half," replied Begbie dryly. He examined the gun, unloaded it, and laid it on the table by his side.

"You had better keep it," said Dad. "I haven't a permit for it and I believe that's an offence against the law, whose protection I've felt rather less confidence in since the death of Linke." His tone altered; he sat up in his chair and stared coldly at Begbie. He might have been a magistrate addressing an unsatisfactory witness.

"Inspector Begbie," he said, "do you think the police are managing this case well? Is such an outrage as occurred to-night to go unpunished, while you sit at my table asking questions of me, who have no knowledge of it whatever?"

"It will not go unpunished, Lord Trent," said Begbie.

"You said the same the day after Linke was shot. All you could tell me is that he was a crook—I could have told you as much as that, and did. Have you traced him?"

"Yes, sir. We've traced Linke."

"Traced him!" said my father quickly. "You know his name?"

"And so do you, Lord Trent; but Linke's death occurred a month ago and I am concerned to-night with the man who killed him. The man who was behind that case is behind this one."

"And this man—when will you make sure of him?" said my father, "or will you let him slip through your fingers, as

you did last time? How much rope are you going to give him?"

"Just enough for a six-foot drop," said Begbie. "We always get our man in the end. It's the jury's hands we have to see he doesn't slip through, not ours."

"I admire your confidence, too," said my father, "and I notice you say 'we.' Can it be that you are no longer in charge of this case, Begbie?"

"I am collaborating with Inspector Palke of the Yard," said Begbie, unruffled, "you didn't happen to meet his car leaving?"

My father sat back, and shook his head.

"You speak of certainties Begbie, but to me, ignorant layman that I am, the case seems full of doubt. You haven't made it clear yet whether Miss Corbyn, who was found in an empty room, wounded, with a pistol beside her, is actually dead or living. Nor, except for a theory which may be wrong, how she came to be removed so mysteriously. You do not tell me these things, because of course the police have to be discreet, or . . . pardon me if I suspect that it is because you don't really know them? But what I fail entirely to understand is *why* Miss Corbyn should have vanished—if she was removed. Why? What motive could anyone have for doing such a thing?"

"The motive. I'll show you that very soon—in fact I am close up against it now," said Begbie, rising. "The motive sometimes evades us for a while at first, but it never remains obscure for long." He moved over to the desk by the window, paused, and glanced back. "Of course, all this has been a terrible shock to you, Lord Trent?"

"Perfectly terrible," said my father slowly. "Linke was no loss to anyone. He was hardly worth hanging a man for. His death, if anything, was a gain to society. But that a young, attractive, courageous girl like Elaine Corbyn—it

doesn't bear thinking of. I refuse to believe her dead. Do you expect to recover her—dead or living?"

"It is a little early to answer that," said Begbie, picking up the silver-bound blotting-pad that I had seen him examining before. "One more question—did Miss Corbyn ever conduct her affairs, or do any of her writing in this room?"

"I don't think she did. She had a private room upstairs, which she always used."

Begbie turned the face of the blotting-pad to a mirror that hung on the wall beside the desk. I could see in the reflection, among a few blotted lines on the white paper, a signature with a large capital E. He laid the pad down again thoughtfully.

"You cannot think of anything else at all, Lord Trent, concerning Miss Corbyn—which might help me in this case?"

"Nothing. I would tell you if I could. She was very secretive about her affairs—very."

Begbie nodded.

"One more thing I have to do, Lord Trent, before taking any final measures. I have to search Miss Corbyn's room for any letters or papers that might throw a light on the case."

"Do so," said my father, "if you must. You know best, and I will not be present; it would be more than I can stand. If you know the room——"

"Next to Miss Craddock's, isn't it?" said Begbie, and went out.

My father turned to me, his face grey and drawn.

"I have always loathed that man," he said quietly, "which is unreasonable after all, for he is doing his duty."

"For heaven's sake, if you know anything, tell me!" I said under my breath.

He looked at me for a moment. The mask came back over his face, defensive and slightly mocking, just as when Begbie questioned him. I never saw his eyes so hard.

"I am in the dark too," he said. "But this man Palke—this sleuth from London—you've seen him? What did he want of you, Ken?"

"All he wanted of me was silence."

"Silence? Wise fellow! Stick to that advice, Ken—nothing so safe as silence. Let the police do their job; don't *you* butt in. What can you hope to do?"

"Listen, father——!"

"I'm a bad listener," he said, moving to the door, "and a worse talker. I'm sorry for everyone concerned in this thing, Ken, and not least for you. You're my son and I put you first." He paused with his hand on the door knob and looked back at me.

"You're looking upset, my boy, and it's not to be wondered at. You've no other news, I suppose, apart from this awful business?"

He might as well have it now as any other time.

"I asked Jenny to marry me."

He nodded.

"I needn't ask what she said, Ken—she loves you. Good little girl, Jenny. I'm fond of her myself. I couldn't have wished you better fortune. But I suppose this isn't the time to congratulate you."

He sighed, and went out.

I stayed a few moments, staring at the closed door. Even now I did not know what to think. When I followed into the hall, he was gone. The house seemed as silent as the tomb. Begbie was somewhere upstairs, as busy as ever. The front doors stood open, I took an electric torch from the box in the hall and passed out into the rain.

The first place I made for was the kennels where Dan the

spaniel lived, near the stables, and called to him, rattling the gate. I turned the torch on him as he came blinking out of his straw bed into the kennel yard, his tail wagging amiably; his coat and ears seemed dry. I opened the gate, and the old fellow trotted along behind me in the rain and mud as I went back past the porch.

Another thought occurred to me. I skirted round to the garage and glanced in through the window. The Chrysler was there. So was Elaine's new Rolls, in the next shed. Both cars were accounted for. As I shut off the torch I heard a sharp voice with a Scotch burr overhead at the open window of the chauffeur's quarters.

"Who's that stravaigin' round here at this time o' night? Whay d'ye want?"

"All right—get back to bed," I said shortly, and hurried back along the streaming paths. I returned Dan to his kennel, and when I reached the house again Begbie was coming downstairs with a sheaf of papers and valise in his hand. He made for the library, and at the same moment my father came across the hall from the gun-room.

He looked at Begbie with the same cold resentment that he had shown on the night when I caught Linke spying behind the door.

"Finished your search, Inspector?" he said. "Am I to hear the result?"

Begbie looked at him for a moment in silence.

"I've a telephone call to put through," he said, "but I'll tell you the result right away, Lord Trent, for I've made a discovery of the first importance, and it concerns you and your son."

He unhooked the receiver on the library table as my father seated himself.

"Station! . . . Hullo! Begbie speaking. Send the police car to Stanways House. . . . Inspector Palke there? . . ."

"Is it your intention to arrest me, Begbie?" said my father with that alluring little smile of his. Begbie hung up the receiver and glanced across at him.

"Why should you imagine that, Lord Trent?"

"Because if you do, should you not give me the customary warning? All I know of police methods has been gathered from works of fiction—doubtless by people who know nothing about the subject."

"I don't study fiction; facts are the only things that count in police work," said Begbie, and laid the valise and papers beside him on the table. "I went through Miss Corbyn's belongings; the writing-case and drawers were locked but I opened them, and among various private papers I found two things that justify the search I made, and here they are.

"One is a letter addressed to Miss Jenny Craddock. The other is this document," said Begbie, drawing a folded paper from a long envelope, "which I'll begin with as it's by far the most important. You don't know what it is, Lord Trent?"

"I am waiting for your explanation, Inspector," said my father, "the case is in your hands, not mine."

"I asked because it carries your signature and it is dated five days back," said Begbie. "I will read it out, for it explains itself."

And in a stolid, unemotional voice, as if he were a broker detailing a bill, Begbie read aloud what was to me the most amazing news I ever heard in my life.

"This is the last Will and Testament of me Elaine Corbyn Power. I give and bequeath three million dollars in invested stock held in my name in the Guaranty Trust Bank, New York, to my loyal friend and companion Jenny Craddock, and a further sum of three millions to my husband, Michael Power, formerly of Deer Lake, Michigan, if he survives me;

the remainder of my property of every kind and where-soever situate I bequeath to the aforesaid Jenny Craddock unconditionally and I appoint her Executrix of this my will; as witness my hand this Eighth day of November, 1929."

"Signed,

"ELAINE CORBYN POWER.

"Witnessed: Trent of Denham; Stanways, Hertfordshire.

Martha Jessop; Housekeeper, Stanways."

WHO IS MICHAEL POWER?

I SAT in stunned silence as Begbie finished the reading of the will. I looked at my father who sat very still, watching the Inspector through half-closed eyes. It seemed to me his self-control was shaken at last.

"A remarkable document, Lord Trent," said Begbie, smoothing it out. "It seems quite in order, so far as one can judge. Miss Craddock inherits three million dollars: roughly £600,000; and Michael Power benefits equally."

"Michael Power!" said my father, reaching for the paper. "And can you tell me, Inspector, who the devil Michael Power is?"

"It's plain enough from this paper that he is Elaine Power's husband. Her maiden name was Elaine Corbyn and under that name she chose to be known here. This document, which if she is dead is worth a fortune, has evidently been kept a pretty close secret. Now that it's in my hands, do you agree with me that we needn't look any further for a motive?"

"I should say not! When you find Michael Power you have a man who has something over three hundred thousand pounds to gain by his wife's death," said my father.

Begbie nodded.

"That's true," he said, taking back the will and laying it beside him. "But it doesn't go all the way—because if anything has happened, or should happen to this Michael Power, then Miss Craddock—your lordship's other guest, who is at present asleep upstairs—inherits everything. The entire fortune would go to her."

"You'll notice, too," continued Begbie, "that Elaine Power didn't seem to know herself whether Power is dead or living. She says here—'if he survives me'. . . . Evidently

she was separated from him, and it looks as if he wasn't a very satisfactory husband—yet she would not, or at any rate did not, leave him out of her will. She leaves him half her fortune if he is alive to claim it."

"And here's another point," said Begbie, "it doesn't seem very likely, does it, that Power could have known the terms of this will, for it's only six days old."

"My good Begbie!" exclaimed my father, "how can I tell what Michael Power knew or didn't know; I never heard of him till this moment."

"Never heard of him?"

"No!"

"Nor that Elaine Corbyn was a married woman—when you signed as witness to this will?"

"No; and I never even knew that it was a will. Shall I explain?"

"If you please," said Begbie.

"Five days ago—it was about ten o'clock in the evening—Miss Corbyn and I were alone in this room; she asked me to witness her signature to a document. She didn't tell me what it was, and I asked no questions; it's the sort of thing one's often asked to do for people, and for all I knew it was a share certificate or a lease. She had the thing with her, and she signed it sitting at that desk by the window."

"She called to me, moved her chair a little to one side to make room for me, gave me her fountain-pen, and I signed where she indicated. The top half of the paper was folded over, so far as I remember. Anyway, I never gave the matter two thoughts until now. It didn't occur to me it could have any bearing on this case or I should have told you."

"But didn't it seem strange to you, Lord Trent, when you wrote your name here opposite hers, that she should sign herself Elaine Corbyn Power?" said Begbie, "since you didn't know her by that name?"

"It certainly would have if I'd noticed it—but there was a slip of blotting paper under her hand as she held the paper for me to sign and covered the last word, all I saw was 'Elaine Corbyn.' I suppose it's all she intended me to see, and as a second witness was necessary, at Miss Corbyn's request I sent for my housekeeper who was the only person available, and she signed too. Would you like to see her—I've no doubt she'll tell you the same?"

"I've no doubt she will," agreed Begbie, pressing the bell, "but we'll have her in now, with your permission, and put it on record."

Mrs. Jessop appeared promptly. She took not the slightest notice of Begbie, until my father requested her to answer his questions. She confirmed everything Dad had said. She was not disconcerted by anything that was asked of her. Begbie kept strictly to the matter of the signature and was very brief with her. She said she had been called in by his lordship to sign something for Miss Corbyn; she had seen Miss Corbyn's signature, she had noticed nothing unusual about it. She could not remember any details, but she thought most of the paper was kept covered up. She had not attempted to pry into it; it was not her place. She vouched for her own signature.

"That will do, Mrs. Jessop. You may go," said Begbie. She curtsied to my father and sailed out, rustling in black silk. I noticed she had changed her dress.

"That was necessary," said Begbie dryly, "for this paper, if it is valid, is worth £1,200,000. Six million dollars."

"Is it valid?" I exclaimed, breaking in, "Surely anyone signing a will, must declare it to be his will before the witnesses who sign it—or it's a wash-out!"

"Is that the law, Inspector?" said my father. "I am a child in these matters."

"No," replied Begbie. "Otherwise, Mr. Rolfe, any two

witnesses who got together and declared they didn't know what they were signing could upset any will ever made. If *you* benefited under this will, Lord Trent——"

"But I do not," returned my father.

"Just so," said Begbie grimly, "if the witnesses to a will are given any benefit under it, then the will's bad." He folded it and buttoned it into his breast pocket. "But *you* don't benefit."

"I'm afraid Begbie, you think me a fool for signing a paper without even knowing what it was," said my father.

"On the contrary, Lord Trent," said Begbie, rising, "if I may say so I consider you one of the most intelligent people I ever met in my life, and I've had some experience. I hear the car outside—and I'll wish you good night."

My father opened the door for him.

"Good night, Begbie. You have lighted up this case marvellously, in so short a time. Did you say there was a message—a letter for Miss Craddock?"

"I've got it here. It will be delivered to her first thing in the morning," said Begbie as he went out. "Good night, Mr. Rolfe."

My father drew a deep breath as he heard the car shoot away down the drive.

"Energetic Begbie. He has taken everything; the will, the letter, even my pistol, and I rather thought he was going to take me. Instead of which he pays me a fulsome compliment, and drives away to consult Scotland Yard. By the way, Ken, which do *you* consider me to be, a fool, a crook, or merely a very intelligent person?"

"I was just wondering," said I, "what Begbie meant when he said you knew who Linke was."

"Did he? So he did; I remember. But Begbie gives me credit for such a lot of knowledge. If the police know who Linke was, they'll declare it when they see fit; but I'm glad

you asked Jenny to be your wife before you ever heard of this will."

"I'd rather not discuss Jenny with you."

"I'll tell you one thing, Ken, though you won't believe me. I would have been just as pleased at you and Jenny getting together, if this cursed business had never happened, and the will had not existed. I'll remind you of that later." His eyes twinkled at me oddly. "But there is one thing that impresses me about this case, and it's just what I expected."

"What is it?"

"Everybody—except yourself of course—within and without the circle, crooks, police, women witnesses even, each and every one is playing for his or her own hand, stacking the cards, bluffing, not one of them playing a straight game. It's been so from the first. All, my boy—all!"

"What do you imagine they are after?"

My father smiled.

"What are we all after?" he demanded. "Money: or its equivalents, credit—promotion—safety—success. People are like that, when you get up against big elemental motives as in this case."

"You have a cheerful opinion of your fellow-creatures," said I.

"I have no opinion of my fellow-creatures," said my father, "and I'm going to bed."

When he had gone out, I switched off the library lights, and stayed for a moment or two reflecting. I remembered that my father had been under heavy obligations to Elaine, since the affair of Crieff and that £250 cheque. It was so long ago, I had almost forgotten it. It would be difficult for him to refuse her anything, if she had chosen to use the pull she had over him—though he was a hard man to drive. But all that seemed trifling in the light of what had happened since.

A great deal had been revealed, but one thing remained

dark as the pit. Where was Elaine, and what had been her fate? No one had answered that.

And Jenny—what would all this money mean to her, coming the way it did? What would she do?

Utterly weary, I went out into the hall, but braced up suddenly as I saw Tilden's car outside the porch. Why had he come back? I ran anxiously up the stairs, and met him coming out of Jenny's room. He looked dead beat, but he greeted me much more amiably, his manner had altered completely.

"My dear chap! Finished my round—looked in again, just in case. Knew how you'd be feeling about it——"

"Is she——?"

"*She's* all right. Sleeping like a cherub."

I grabbed hold of him and tried to thank him; suddenly he seemed to spin all round me, everything went black, and I heard his voice as if out of a fog.

"Hold up, man! I've enough patients on my hands already!"

I suppose I must have been feeling the strain a bit; never thought I should go under like that. It was humiliating. I don't remember anything more except Tilden giving me a drink that smelled like a hospital, as I sat on my bed. After that a soothing, dreamless oblivion.

XXXIV

THE CABLEGRAM

WHEN I woke the sun was streaming in through my bedroom window. I lay blinking for a few moments, shook off a sort of stuffiness in the head, and got a shock when I glanced at the watch on the table beside me. It was past eleven.

The events of the night before came crowding back on me in a flood, but my first waking thought was for Jenny, through a mist of semi-consciousness.

I thrust a leg out of bed and grabbed the bell-push; my thumb had only been on the button a few seconds when there was a tap at the door and Inspector Palke came in, like a man sure of his welcome, as cordially and confidently as if he had known me for years.

There was a folded newspaper under his arm; he looked at me with that magnetic smile of his and I blinked up at him with dubious eyes. I felt I had a friend in Palke, but a friend with a cutting edge to him. To find a policeman at one's bedside on waking is a disconcerting thing.

"Had a good night? That's fine!" he said. "Yes?—I've seen Miss Craddock; your turn next. I've a message for you. But I want a little talk with you first."

"How is she? . . . And Elaine, haven't you news of Elaine?—made any arrest? What's the message?"

"No arrest—Fish slipped through the net. The message——" he stopped short. "Yes, come in!"

The maid was at the door with the tea that came automatically in response to my ring, part of the routine of Stanways; I believe if the judgement trumpet were sounding they would bring the tea along as soon as one woke. Palke took the tray and set it on my bed.

"Get that into you; you're in the want of it," he said. "Not a word till it's down."

He stepped across and locked the door; to hurry him I reached for the tea and gulped down a cupful and some biscuits; I certainly wanted it. He watched me with curious eyes, and handed me a little grey envelope with my name on it.

"This is no part of my duty—passing messages between Miss Craddock and you. But I was never a purist for duty, as they'll tell you at the Yard. That's for you."

I tore the note open and read:

"In the face of all our trouble, I'm sending you this because I love you, Ken. Try not to worry too much, dear. And I would put my hand in the fire for your father. I am being guided by Inspector Palke, and I beg you, do the same.

"Love,

"JENNY."

It set my heart singing. Loyal, loving little Jenny! It was a gleam of light breaking through clouds of tragedy. Not even a message from a C.I.D. Inspector dovetailed into a note like that, could spoil it for me. Indeed old Palke, standing opposite me with a face like a lean bronze idol, was invested with a halo of romance and hope.

"Cheer up, Rolfe," he said approvingly. I had bounced out of bed as if he had galvanised me.

"But why, man! Why need she write at all? Where is she?"

"Come over here." He beckoned to me standing by the window curtains. "You've just time. Thought you might like to signal her good-bye. Lord knows when you'll see her again."

I heard the whirr of a motor as I hurried across to the window. A closed black car was making its exit down the park drive; I had a glimpse of Jenny's head, she was looking up at the window and she waved to me. A pretty figure I must have looked, blinking stupidly there with my pyjama collar

on end and my hair ruffled. The car swerved round the bend of the avenue and was gone.

"I want her clear of this place and out of harm's way," said Palke. "She'll be watched and I think you can make your mind easy about her. It isn't necessary you or anyone else should know where Miss Craddock is, for a while. Let it alone, or you'll do more harm than good. We don't want any more fatalities. Tell yourself that all's well, and be content."

It's easy enough to tell a man to be content. I looked at the empty road, and at the letter again. Then I noticed a P.T.O. at the foot of the note. I turned the page quickly. On the inner leaf were four brief lines more, in Jenny's handwriting. And as I read this second message I gasped as if a pailful of cold water had been flung in my face. I'd thought that this infernal case had prepared me for any shock.

I put the letter down and stared across at Palke. He was watching me with anxious eyes, and a faint, slow smile.

"Rolfe, what that letter may contain is your business," he said, "but you'll admit it is mine too. Lock it up in your mind. Absolute secrecy; absolute silence remember. If you breathe a word of it to any living soul, you'll wreck my case and trip up the heels of justice."

I nodded, folding the note in my fingers.

"You'd better burn that," said Palke.

"Sooner burn myself!" said I, "This letter's mine." I locked the note carefully away in a back drawer of the old tall-boys chest by my bedside. "And now—Elaine! What can you do?"

"There's only one thing left to be done," said Palke. "I'll not be content with getting the man who shot her—if I ever do. There are four people at least—there may be more—who planned the murder of Elaine."

"I can't leave you out of this, Rolfe. You're dipped so deep in the case now, that I've got to carry you along with me.

Will you trust me entirely? I want your help. There'll be some risks—but consider the risk that girl took! I'll let you into this case, step by step till we finish it together."

"That's good enough!" I said, and stopped short, watching the man's keen face and pleasant yet ruthless eyes, "with one reservation, Palke."

"Well?"

"If you are after my father, you'll get no help from me. I'll see you in hell first."

Palke's eyes flickered. He looked at me with a dry little smile.

"Do you really think, Rolfe, that I would ask a man to hunt his own father?"

"I don't know that I'd put it past you. Begbie is after him."

Palke smiled.

"Lord Trent has been a little too deep for Begbie. I'm letting Begbie stand down; the Linke case is plenty to occupy him, and he's handling it quite efficiently. But get that trouble right out of your mind. Your father had no hand in the removal of Elaine—that, at least he is clear of."

I sat up, gasping.

"Palke!" I said remorsefully, "what a fool I've been!"

"Not at all," said Palke, "a very natural mistake on your part. In fact, until I got back last night I was none too sure myself. And should I find I've made an error I will own to it; you shall have fair warning. By the way, has it occurred to you who the late Linke is—or rather was?"

"Yes—he was Michael Power; Elaine's husband."

Palke shook his head.

"A close shot—but just misses it. We'll come to that in a minute. Now we're getting our facts, making certainties of them; let us see if we can straighten them out in their right order. I'll give you as shortly as I can the mainspring of the case, which is the story of Elaine's marriage with Michael Power."

ELAINE'S MARRIAGE

"W H E N Elaine Corbyn was twenty," said Inspector Palke, "she kept a little store in Gallwey, which is a one-cylinder town up-country in Michigan. She had not only to keep herself but her mother, who was a widow, and pretty helpless at that."

"Michael Power lived a few miles off at Deer Lake; a man of forty-five, an estate-agent in a small way. She was an uncommon pretty girl, and he made her the offer which is said to be the highest compliment a man can pay a woman; there are some compliments dear at any price. She turned him down. Elaine wasn't looking for trouble. But she found it."

"Her mother fell dangerously ill. She was past any help from the State hospital, and Elaine went to a specialist. But you know what specialists are. It was one of those illnesses poor folks should be careful not to get. She had to have a change of climate; California or Florida, and treatment lasting months. It couldn't be done under a couple of thousand dollars. Elaine couldn't have raised three hundred."

"Then Power stepped in. If she would marry him right away, he'd put up the two thousand. He wasn't a rich man at all. But it got him like that. Asked her to consider it. She did—hoping there'd be some other way out. There wasn't. Power knew that. But he didn't drive her too hard."

"‘You hate the idea of marrying me,’ he said, ‘or at any rate of living with me, now. Maybe you think I’m taking an unfair advantage, and you’d never forget it. I’d like you to know me better than that, and I’ll make a compact with you.’"

"‘I’ll let you have the two thousand now, to show I trust you. We’ll be married right away, and the marriage will be

quite private; no one's affair but your's and mine. You can leave me, if you wish, as soon as they've made us man and wife. You can keep your own name, tell no one, just keep going on as Elaine Corbyn. And I'll never claim you till you say the word. A man can't ever make his wife live with him, if she doesn't want to."

"Take your mother away, and save her. You've needed her most of your life. Now she needs you. I'll be content to wait."

"That shook Elaine. She felt Power was a great little man."

"Now, I'll tell you your share in the compact," said Power. "Since you don't care for me enough yet to live with me, I'll make a will in your favour, leaving all I have to my wife—Elaine Power. We'll draw it now, it will be signed and valid as soon as we're on the register."

"You'll do as much for me. You'll make a will of your own, leaving anything you have or become possessed of to your husband, Michael Power. You'll stand by that will, as long as I stand by mine. Isn't that fair, as between man and wife?"

"She had nothing and was never likely to have. She came of poor folk."

"Put it like this," he said, "it's so you shan't feel you are taking something for nothing, say it's an acknowledgement against the settlement I'm giving you. All you're thinking of now is your mother; but there are two sides to a bargain. This two thousand is just the half of all I have. And here's my share for you right now, Elaine."

"He put the money down on the table. Two thousand in hundred dollar bills. The price of her mother's life."

"She saw she must take it; but she made one condition of her own."

"No one can be sure of what's going to happen," she said. "If I don't survive my mother I won't take the risk of leaving her with nothing. I'll leave you the half of whatever I have and you can do the same."

"‘That goes,’ said Power. ‘Fair to both of us. Let’s get it done.’”

"He drew up the two wills. Half whatever he died possessed of, to his wife, Elaine Power. Half hers, to him."

"‘There’s one thing more,’ he said. ‘Fetch down your mother’s Bible.’”

"‘Now,’ said Power, ‘you’ll lay your hand on the Book, and swear that so long as I live you will never revoke that will; that you’ll stand honestly by those terms whatever happens. And I’ll swear the same.’”

"Two days later they were married—away in another town where they weren’t known. Their names were set to the wills and witnessed; they separated at the door, according to contract. Elaine went back to Gallwey, sold up what she had . . . told her mother she had raised enough, and took her away to Santa Barbara. She’d plenty to cover the expenses and the treatment. And she found work. Her mother recovered. At the end of the year she was well."

"And now it was up to Elaine to meet her contract. Was she to say the word, and become Power’s wife in fact as well as in name? She hated the idea, and no doubt hated herself for feeling she couldn’t meet it."

"‘But why?’" I broke in, "‘wasn’t it obvious the man was a damned scoundrel?’"

"Not at all," replied Palke, "certainly not to Elaine. You’re being wise after the event, Rolfe. Look at it from her point of view, and the circumstances she was in."

"She wrote to Power; would he give her time? She put it up to him."

"Power replied. He seemed as generous and considerate as ever. He said, wait awhile. He would give her a year to consider. He wouldn’t wish her to come to him unwillingly."

"Any kind of respite was welcome to her. She wrote to him gratefully; got no reply. At the end of another ten

months her mother, who had seemed good for a long life, died "

"Before she died, Elaine told her the story. I suppose her mother saw there was something wrong, and got it out of her. She felt she couldn't keep it to herself any longer; it was a confession. Her mother was a religious woman; an oath taken on the Book was inviolable to her. She couldn't urge her daughter to a life of unhappiness. 'But,' said her mother, 'if you feel you cannot be his wife, at least you must hold to the terms you promised him; as he has kept his bond faithfully and trusted you, you can never break yours.' Elaine agreed with that."

"She met the loss we all have to face, soon or late, and now she was alone. No one but herself to depend on—not that that mattered, she'd the pluck of ten. But where was Power?"

"For months there had been no word of him. She made enquiries. The folks in his home town knew nothing of him; he had left long ago. There were rumours that he was dead—but nothing definite—nothing that she could verify. Nobody seemed interested in Michael Power. There was an account of his at the Deer Lake branch bank—nearly empty, and not drawn on for a year."

"If he was dead, and had anything to leave, she could claim under his will. She wouldn't have done that anyway. She told nobody of her relations with Michael Power; she kept her secret. And feeling, evidently with some remorse, that she hadn't treated him over well, she came east to New York—leaving her will banked at Gallwey, where it had been since she was married."

"In New York she met up with Jane Craddock, who'd been a friend of hers in the early days in Michigan; Elaine got a stenographer's job that Jane found for her."

"Then came that next most amazing event in Elaine's

life, and by a long way the least expected. She found herself a rich woman. A relative who was believed to have died years ago on the Mexican border, and whom nobody had ever supposed to have a bean, left her a freight of money. His story—the story of Benjy Slade—is a romance in itself but all that concerns you and me to-day, Rolfe, is that Elaine Corbyn was his only living relative; she inherited six million dollars.”

“The first thing she did when she had the news was to raise money against her legacy—all she could get for a start was four thousand before her claim was proved. She wrote again to the Deer Lake Bank at once, for news of Power.”

“She wrote under her own name; Elaine Corbyn. Gave nothing away.”

“The bank acknowledged receipt, but replied they didn’t know where Power was, though his account was still open. All enquiries failed.”

“Still no Power! The thing was hanging over her, same as ever. Legally she was a married woman, but actually—well, what was she? There were ways out of it, of course, but they couldn’t be taken in a hurry, even if she chose those ways. It was much more disquieting to be left in the dark like this, waiting——”

I crashed in again.

“She still held on to those terms—after she knew she’d been cunningly fooled by this crook? She *must* have wiped the whole thing out; will and all. . . .”

“Do you think all folks are alike, Rolfe?” said Palke. “You’re suggesting now what you’d have done—or think you would have . . . or what I’d have done. Cut the knot at once, go back on everything she’d sworn, of course; cancel the will before witnesses——”

“She should have burned it!”

“And having done so, make another one cutting him out

altogether, eh? If she died intestate, leaving no will at all, her husband would inherit everything she'd got, instead of only half? Well, she just felt she couldn't do things that way."

"There are people who regard a contract and an oath as something inviolable and unbreakable, so long as the other party doesn't break it. She could have had her lawyers break it—much the same thing. I suppose you didn't happen to notice, Rolfe, that Elaine Corbyn was a woman with a strong will and plenty of courage; a belief that she could handle her own affairs better than anyone else?"

"I should think I did notice it! Go on—what did she do?"

"She had already decided to clear out and get away from it all. To leave for Europe and live abroad for a year. But she took certain precautions, for I think she must have sensed danger."

"In New York she got acquainted with a woman who knew England well, who suggested an introduction to Lord Trent. She could stay with him as a paying guest at Stanways House."

"To Elaine it seemed the very thing she wanted. Better than beating around in hotels. The arrangements were made privately, and as soon as probate was through and she had control of her fortune she sailed for England, taking Jenny Craddock with her as attendant. The first time she struck trouble was on the drive from Euston; that job was a raw business but we can leave it for the moment and get on. Then there was the spy you caught sneaking round the house a week ago—or rather failed to catch, but nothing really serious happened till that appalling affair of last night."

"It was quick work, Rolfe, but there's no risk crooks won't take for a prize like that. Doesn't it look very much as if they'd got away with it?"

"But Power! If he's living——?"

"Certainly he's living. We've been pretty quick too.

In fact we're just a shade ahead, and we've already placed Michael."

"Then you've got him! He's arrested?"

"Why, no. What should we do with him, if we arrested him? He has a three thousand mile alibi, you see—our Michael Power."

"His work, clearly! The head of the gang."

"That will take a bit of proving," said Palke, "for Michael Power has been in a Canadian jail eighteen months—which goes some way to account for his wife not finding him. He was only released three days ago. But I shouldn't wonder if we got further news of him."

There was a gentle tap at the door. A smooth-looking young stranger in grey tweeds opened the door in response to Palke's answer, and beckoned to him respectfully.

"Come in, Jim," said Palke. "You don't mind, do you, Mr. Rolfe?"

"Another DX cable, sir—'phoned through from Wheatbridge," said the young man, handing him a slip of paper. "Decoded it to save time."

Palke glanced at the slip, and nodded.

"All right as far as it goes," he said. "Thank you, Jim. Get back to the gun-room telephone; you can smoke if you like. Are you comfortable there?"

"Nice quiet room," said the plain-clothes man as he backed out and closed the door. Palke handed me the slip of paper.

"15 November. 8.10 a.m."

"New York. DX.2.

"Michael Power sailed *Carthusian* for Liverpool, 5 p.m. yesterday."

"Collins. JJ5."

SHADOWED

"POWER on his way here?" I exclaimed.

"Sailed last night. That's from Central Office, New York. JJ5 is Captain Slade Collins, and if you see it on a DX cable, it's so."

"Strange how things fall out, isn't it Rolfe—if Linke hadn't been shot in Black Spinney at the back of your house, we probably shouldn't know that Michael Power is now clear of the Hudson River, and heading east," said Palke filling his pipe.

"Get on to this, Rolfe. Allowing for the difference in time between here and New York, which is five hours, it looks impossible, doesn't it, that when Michael sailed he could have already known himself to be a widower . . . for he couldn't know what happened at Stanways last night, London time, and got away from the West River Pier or even from Quarantine down in the bay, at five."

"If those times are correct he couldn't possibly know!" I exclaimed.

Palke ejected a thin stream of smoke from his nostrils; his eyes glinted at me through the blue haze.

"So. It looks on the face of it, as if the right hand of this gang didn't know what its left hand was doing," he said. "But is that likely? No. However, we know where Michael Power is. He is crossing the Atlantic in a halo of innocence."

"Innocent!" said I, "if he expects to get away with that he must be the king of optimists."

"Why?"

"Innocent or guilty, what will his claim on his wife's estate be worth?"

"Three million dollars, Rolfe. Put yourself in his place;

you are married, your wife is murdered to-night—or dies by her own hand—4,000 miles from here. No power of the law can prevent you inheriting, unless there's some sure proof of guilt brought home to *you*. Risk? No doubt there'd be some small risk. But three million dollars are a lot of dollars."

"But now you've got Power taped——"

"I tell you, Power by himself is no use to us. Where we fail up till now, is that we haven't a vestige in the way of evidence to trace those who did the job. Unless we get them before Power arrives, we shall never get them. Who are they? I don't know. And when I don't know a fact I own to it. We have got to do our best."

"Now leave Michael Power on the S.S. *Carthusian* for a minute, Rolfe, and just turn your mind back to his relations with Elaine—to that first year of his marriage. The terms, the separation, the long delay—what strikes you as the most significant feature of all that?"

"He knew all the while that sooner or later money would be coming her way; he knew what she didn't know and was biding his time."

"That's obvious," said Palke impatiently, "but why allow himself to be put off so easily, or wait so long? In his place, wouldn't you have made sure of *her*? The natural thing to do. He could have done it. Why didn't he? Some strong reason. What?"

I reflected; it didn't take me long.

"The other woman!" said I. Palke laughed.

"There's the makings of a detective in you after all," said he. "Yes, in this sort of case that simple rule doesn't often fail. There was another woman, a driving force in Michael Power's life three years ago. What do we know of her? Nothing. But she isn't a deduction, she is no theory. She's flesh and blood."

"There was a woman, quite certainly, outside the morning-

room last night; though she had only twenty minutes start of us there's nothing left to swear by but a blurred footmark or two. There's almost as little trace of the gunman. Nothing known of either of them. It's sure they must have come over from the other side, and they were no amateurs. New York always lets us know when anyone comes over who's likely to interest us. But those two got past with it. They were never reported. And they arrived here well ahead of Elaine, they must have been aware that she was coming not only to England, but to Stanways. Did they travel on the same boat with her? I believe not. It's much more likely that the woman was here all along. And she's as elusive as a ghost. Unless I'm much mistaken, she's the brains of the gang. Unless they're under the skull of Michael. She certainly has the courage. But none of them seem to be wanting in that."

"And her partner here. The Other Man?" I suggested.

"Maybe. But perhaps just a hireling—a gunman."

"Why were they both on the spot together? It only doubled the risk."

"On the contrary. Such a job as that is seldom done single-handed. Moreover, these crooks never trust each other. But I'm not guessing at their motives nor their reasons; and now we come to Linke.

"Here we're on solid ground. There's an Official Memory sitting in an office overlooking the Thames; it never forgets anything, it indexed Spike O'Dowd in fifteen minutes, although he had no face. But it hadn't any record of Linke. There's another Memory, just as sure, within a gunshot of the Hudson River. And when its sensitive antennæ were touched by a message—a docket came back quick with contacts from Manhattan, St. Louis, and Los Angeles. There was no longer any mystery about Linke, beyond the matter of his killing. I didn't ask for a new inquest; I kept the curtain drawn. So we get a step farther."

"Linke has held several jobs as personal servant or valet; sometimes as a courier. And he has served three terms of imprisonment; in each case for blackmail. He's not an easy person to trace and he has several aliases; but the one that fits him best and he has a right to is Power. Stephen Power, brother, so it seems, to Michael. But rather a different proposition."

"Why, Palke, you've got the whole case in your hands if you know that!"

"I'd give two fingers if I had. You overlooked the point that Linke is dead, and whatever knowledge he had died with him. He was installed at Stanways before his allies, the woman and her partner, arrived; he was the man inside, the inner line of communication. A great pity he is dead, one wonders what he might have told us—and if it would have been the truth. He knew a great deal. And he held something up his sleeve. It's a way all these sort of people have."

Palke looked at me shrewdly.

"Isn't there one little thing you haven't told me, Rolfe? Didn't Linke make some sort of a proposition to you—try to get an offer out of you—the night he was fired . . . And just before quitting?"

He was right as usual. I had kept that one thing back—on my father's account more than mine; for Linke's affair hadn't seemed to matter so much lately. And above all things I hated talking about that last fateful interview. Now the dead man had suddenly taken shape again.

"He did," said I, and forthwith I told him exactly what had taken place between Linke and myself the last time I saw him alive.

A surprising fellow, Palke. I got the impression I was telling him what he already knew, and when I had finished, he said:

"Not so bad. There's only one better reply you can make to a blackmailer. Where did Linke get it?"

"On the seat of his pants."

"Naturally; but the location of this happy interview—wasn't it on the path by the back steps, the far side of the house?"

"That's the spot," I said uneasily, "how the devil——"

"Close under the side window of the library, eh—which is on the floor just above. You had left Lord Trent in the library, and there was nothing to prevent his overhearing this business between you and Linke; in fact he did overhear it."

"Did he tell you so?"

"Of course he didn't. But it's a point there's no doubt about."

"Surely, Palke, you weren't investigating the case at that time?"

"No, but Begbie was. He did some quite useful work. The morning after Linke's murder, he had already established that a woman had been present in Black Spinney. The tracks were faint and the clues were slight. He made a further discovery. He found similar footmarks of a woman in the dry soil among the laurel bushes far from the back entrance of Stanways."

"Begbie has never been able to trace that woman further nor to find any clue to her. But she had certainly been hiding up there, the night before, and apparently she was alone then. We deduce that she was in touch with the Stanways household, had a pretty close knowledge of it, and she was a clever watcher."

"Whom was she watching?"

"Begbie has his theory. Mine is that she was spying on Linke. She didn't trust him. She overheard that little interview of yours with him, and learned that he was playing for his own

hand; willing, if he got his price, to go back on his friends and sell his knowledge in a better market. That is a kink you'll always find in the blackmailer. He naturally seldom sticks to an agreement if he finds one that will pay higher; and he dislikes sharing. Danger never appeals to him if he can dodge it and play safety."

"The woman and her partner were the active agents, the cutting edge of the scheme. Michael Power stood to win a fortune in the event of Elaine Corbyn's death; it was necessary that he should be, or appear, entirely innocent of it. If and when it came off, they would have Michael in their pocket."

"Right next to that scheme, knowing all the facts, an ally that they couldn't shelve or leave out was Linke, otherwise Stephen Power. Their game was up if he went back on them. When the woman, mistrusting him, found that that was just what he was ready to do, she passed the word to the man with the gun. The stake was too big, and they couldn't risk letting Linke baulk them for his own profit. His mouth had to be stopped; and it was stopped that night in Black Spinney."

"Linke was out of the way. The killers came back that same night with a car. They would have removed Linke if it could have been done with safety. They left little in the way of traces, but enough to show what their intention was. Here we touch certainty again; somebody else intervened, and they had to fade out and leave the body in the wood."

"So, a dead man was discovered in the Spinney, and Begbie, following up the trail very intelligently—his work was really excellent—found very little to help him at Stanways, and nothing to connect Linke with the two unknown women who had just arrived from New York. Elaine Corbyn failed to recognise him—declared she knew nothing of him. She wasn't helpful. Neither were you, Rolfe. I don't know that I blame you. You might have cleared yourself of suspicion——"

"This clears my father too! It shows he couldn't have had any part in it at all."

"Ah, that doesn't by any means follow," said Palke. "What does follow, and interests me very much more—it will soon be interesting all the world—is that the automatic which showed Linke the way out of it was the gun which that amazingly plucky girl had to face last night, when she paid the price for this damned conspiracy of silence. Unless I get that gunman," said Palke gently, "I don't know that I shall take much more interest in life myself. This isn't the sort of case I can feel cold-blooded about, though I may have seemed so to you. It's unprofessional, to show feeling of this sort. But I shan't count the casualties, nor care who squeals, if I can herd everyone concerned into the dock."

"You won't hear me squealing. And the man who got away with Elaine—what of him? Are you forgetting him?"

Palke rose.

"If the others are roped in, I can get that man any time I want him."

"Can you keep the story out of the papers?" I asked.

He looked at me sharply.

"Why on earth?"

"It's a hunch I've got, Palke, that if this news about Elaine is kept back till the trailing is done, you'll win; and if not you'll be beaten. I may be no detective, but I'm dead sure that publicity and the cold truth will scare the murderer off the map and beyond your reach. Shall I tell you why?"

"No," said Palke, "and I'm afraid your brain-wave misses it, Rolfe. In any case it's late for this. Why, the news is out now. In the Stop Press column, and posterred besides."

"What! It's impossible."

"Look here," he said, and handed me the early edition of the *Daily Wire*.

I took it and stared blankly at the black headline over an announcement packed into the Late News space.

TRAGEDY AT STANWAYS HOUSE

Miss Elaine Corbyn, a wealthy American woman, was found shot last night in an empty room at Stanways House, Herts.

There the report ended.

"Where the devil did they get this?" I said.

"From me," replied Palke. "I 'phoned it to the *Wire* office last night soon after leaving you."

"Why does it stop at that? Not a word about the disappearance——"

"Can't pack an entire murder case into the Stop Press," said Palke. "One must cut it short somewhere."

He reached for his hat, and laid a hand on my shoulder as he turned to go.

"Sit tight for twenty-four hours, Rolfe. Dead silence till I give you the word, and I think we've got our birds, I'm taking a chance; it's going to be a pretty dangerous job for everybody. But those who are running the risk have asked for it, and they can't squeal. *You'll* keep your head shut, anyhow. I want you to remain on guard here in the house and not leave it on any account—till the morning. After that you can do as you like."

"Why man, do you think you can keep this thing dark!" I exclaimed as he turned the door handle. "All the household knows more than there is in that paper—they're bound to talk."

"You're mistaken," said Palke, "not a soul knows anything about it except your father, Miss Craddock, and Dr. Tilden. Your father will certainly not open his mouth; and I've ensured that Tilden won't talk. A very sound fellow; I saw him last night."

"By the way," he added with a twinkle, "that must have been a pretty stiff sleeping dope he gave you when he came back. I knew you'd been having the devil's own time of it with your father and Begbie. I was feeling rather sorry for you, Rolfe—and I still am. You're going to need all the sympathy you can get."

The door closed suddenly behind him, and a few moments later I heard his car driving away.

XXXVII

THE LIGHT IN THE LODGE

I DIDN'T know whether to be furious with the man or to laugh, as I bounced out of bed and took a rapid cold bath. For nerve I never knew Palke's match, but the suggestion that I had been deliberately doped out of the way and put to sleep comfortably because it suited Palke's book, certainly did raise my gall.

But as I hurried into my clothes my spirits rose every moment. Jenny was out of harm's way, come what might; safeguarded by the police, and clear of the whole horrible business. I owed that to Palke—in fact from start to finish it was hard to reckon up how much I was in his debt; though the loss of her left a gap that nothing else could fill.

When I went down, the house seemed uncannily quiet. Out of doors everything was fresh and bright after a night of heavy rain. I found three maid-servants in the library, talking excitedly in undertones. They seemed embarrassed when I entered, and they hurried out. A parlour-maid looked at me curiously and was evidently bracing herself to ask a question. I suppose I looked more forbidding than usual; she subsided and followed the others.

Palke had said they knew nothing which mattered. He might be right; a household staff generally knows more than it's given credit for. And somehow in the full light of day, the amazing events of the past night seemed to have faded out like an evil dream; one could hardly realise they had happened.

I passed into the grounds. Of the faint trails and foot-prints that we had examined overnight there remained no trace; it seemed to me that the flower-bed below the morning-

room window must have been raked over early in the night, so thoroughly was everything obliterated; the rain had done the rest.

The morning-room presented a blank front of heavy bolted shutters inside the window; the door in the passage was locked. For a few moments that sinister room drew me like a magnet. Then I left, glad enough to get away from it. Nothing to be done there.

Palke had asked me to remain in the house. On guard, he had said. What did he mean by that? What did he expect me to do—he had given me no instructions.

Elaine's room I also found was locked; Jenny's too. I made an unobtrusive tour of the house and had soon accounted for all the indoor staff, with the exception of Mrs. Jessop. And of my father there was no sign.

All through this apparently useless secrecy I was thinking busily, straightening out in my head the amazing story that I had heard, and reaching for the final solution.

Suddenly, like a flash it came home to me; I believed I saw clearly where Palke was shaping. It was a revelation. I was still outlining it mentally, deciding what my own part in it should be, when I found myself facing my father, who came in unexpectedly by the back door, in a heavy overcoat and carrying a little valise.

I stopped dead, tongue-tied. I never felt so apologetic and embarrassed in my life; now it was as though he was the accuser, and I the accused. His manner had completely altered. He looked at me with a cynical hostility that made me still more uncomfortable.

"You are on duty, of course?" he said. "As for me I find the atmosphere of this house so sinister and suspicious that I'm clearing out. I've had enough of it. You'll find it necessary, I suppose, to let Palke know you saw me go, and the time?"

"For Mike's sake don't talk like that, Dad!" I said, for my nerves were on edge. "Look here, I want to tell you——"

"Tell me nothing. Much better for you; and probably for me. Jenny Craddock is now under police protection it seems, and that ought to satisfy you. Quite natural. Palke has you on a string." He turned up the collar of his overcoat. "A devil of a fellow, this Palke," he added. "Perfectly unscrupulous. He's going to land us all in the cart. But I'm past caring. He is intelligent at any rate, and I prefer him to Begbie. Good-bye for the present, my boy. Remember that your unfortunate father wishes you well, though he finds it a duty to take care of himself. Don't talk to the servants, by the way."

"Where is Mrs. Jessop?" I asked as he turned away.

"I doubt if you'll ever get over that habit of asking foolish questions," rejoined my father, and disappeared down the garage path.

It was a relief in a way, but I felt very lonely and apprehensive after he had gone. As if it were likely I should talk of this business to the servants!

One thing I did expect, and dreaded the job of coping with it, was the arrival of the Pressmen from London.

It seemed to me they were bound to come flocking down on the trail of such a story as this, and all the more because I found to my surprise that there was not a word about it in the *Express* or *The Times*—we don't take the all-popular *Wire* at Stanways. I didn't think even Palke would have the nerve to give them an exclusive "scoop" at the risk of having all the other papers calling for his blood; the police usually take care not to upset the Press.

But not a soul, to my knowledge, came near Stanways that day, and though I was strung up with the expectation of some rough stuff that I could take hold of and deal with, nothing happened. That was what galled me. I wanted action, and it looked as if Palke had switched me on to a side-track

for his own ends. When night fell, I was raging at the thought that he had sold me a pup. If this was what he called leaving me on guard, I was fed up with it. But I took the little twenty-bore gun up to bed with me.

At ten o'clock, as I looked out from my window across the park, I saw a distant light glimmering like a tiny star, low down among the trees near the south entrance. It was steady but faint, as though somebody had stood a lantern there.

XXXVIII

THE REPORTER

I JUDGED it to be nearly a mile away; it was in the opening of the south lane, hard by Black Spinney. There was something queerly suggestive about that spark of light in the gloom. I hadn't imagination enough to picture it as a corpse-candle marking the spot where Linke the blackmailer had met his end. Linke—Stephen Power, brother to Michael who was on his way across the Atlantic, claimant to the millions lodged at the Guaranty Trust. I thought it was likely to be something much more material.

Black Spinney had such a morbid attraction for me that I was all for slipping quietly out to investigate. But I didn't go; Palke's instructions held me to the house, and though I resented them I sat tight, watching the light for an hour, when it was suddenly extinguished. For another half-hour I watched, smoking thoughtfully. Then I turned in, fully dressed; the little spark of light was with me in my dreams. . . .

When I woke in the morning, with the gun lying beside me and Stanways just as quiet and peaceful as usual, I felt mad enough to shoot Palke, who turned up on the stroke of eight, just as I came downstairs.

"Well, who's wearing the handcuffs?" I said. "Have you left me out of it?"

"You may hear them click if you listen," he replied. "Now don't get sour, Rolfe, I'll put you in the front seat if you'll have a few hours' patience. Seen anything here?"

I told him about the light. He showed no interest in it.

"No law against showing a light in peace time," he said, and gave me the *Wire*, "Here's the latest."

I flew off the handle.

"Damn it all, Palke, what's the *Wire* to me? I want action, not morning editions!"

"You'll get all the action you need. And don't speak lightly of the Press. Read that snapshot report, Rolfe. It takes us where we want to go, and it touches you closely."

I opened the paper. And I got a jar that shook me. The sting wasn't in the big middle-page headlines, but in the tail of the report.

THE STANWAYS TRAGEDY

There was a lead-off of personal stuff about Stanways, Elaine, and her wealth, which I skipped hastily.

... At twenty-past nine on Friday night, Mr. Kenyon Rolfe, Lord Trent's son, startled by a sound which he believed to be a gunshot, hurried into the morning-room and found Miss Elaine Corbyn apparently fatally injured; a bullet wound in her right temple.

The windows of the room were closed. She was still conscious but unable to speak, and it seems uncertain whether she was still living when Mr. Rolfe hurried out to summon medical help with all possible speed. That help was never to reach her.

The most amazing feature of the case is that during that brief absence of Mr. Rolfe's, which is accounted for by his call to the doctor and the police and occupied but a few minutes, Miss Corbyn disappeared. When he returned the window was open and she was gone.

Here followed a short account of my own futile search and pursuits.

Police were on the spot within a quarter of an hour. Search soon revealed tracks showing that Miss Corbyn had been removed by a man who had entered by the window; there were other confused footmarks, but owing to heavy rain all trails failed.

Up to the present the identity of this man, who has thrown so sinister a cloud of mystery over the fate of Miss Corbyn remained unrevealed.

There is only a small household staff at Stanways, none of whom, it appears, were aware of the tragedy till the police actually arrived.

Lord Trent was not in the house at the time the shot was fired, and on his return he declared himself not only ignorant of the occurrence, but of any motive that Miss Corbyn could have had, or any reason for the subsequent mysterious removal.

The pistol found by Miss Corbyn's side remained where it lay and has been identified as her own. Miss Corbyn lay within six feet of the fireplace, at the back of the room. The pistol was close by her right hand. It is a small 33 automatic with the usual nine rounds; one shot discharged.

That finished it. Not a word about the will. But it was that last line which got me. I flung the paper down and turned to Palke.

"The gun was clean!" I said.

"And on that point the case turns," replied Palke. "—and one other. It *was* clean, my dear Rolfe, when you found it. But you didn't know that. Begbie gave that fact away to you. The more fool he. A man who is after a murderer has no right to be humane, and even Begbie has a soft side. He knew *your* hands were clean, and seeing you half off your head because you thought the girl had shot herself, he put you wise and showed you the clean barrel—which he'd no business to do."

"Do we tell the papers everything we know? Not very often, Rolfe, until we're ready. The pistol and the spent shell are on record to show. Only three people know. Myself, Begbie, and you. Your mouth is closed."

I looked at him, rather aghast.

"But man, are you going to let a million people believe that Elaine Corbyn died by her own hand!" I said.

Palke drew coolly at his pipe, peering at me through the smoke.

"My dear Rolfe, it's nothing to me, at this stage, what the public choose to believe or what deductions they make."

"That news-story there has got all England wondering what really happened to Elaine Corbyn, and by to-night America will be wanting to know as well. But there's not a soul will want to know quite so badly as the man who shot Elaine. He'd give his eyes for that knowledge. And guessing's mighty dangerous for him."

"You see, don't you, Rolfe? Since you'd learned so much I had to show you all there was to be seen, and secure you on my side. I believe another twenty-four hours will see us home."

"You're a clever devil, Palke, and you've certainly your nerve with you! Even now I don't see clearly what you're driving at?"

"You don't? Use your brains. You're the only one that's inside the game. And it's a great game, Rolfe. They'll break me if I lose."

"But man, you're holding up half creation! What about the *Wire* man? You won't get away with that!"

"What, Charlie Flint, the liveliest little wire in Fleet Street? I wouldn't naturally try to fool Charlie," said Palke reproachfully. "We've been in too many big cases together, Charlie and I, and though he's for his paper before all things, he has the makings of a great policeman. He's sitting in my car at the moment. He'll ask you nothing this time—so you needn't tell him anything."

"I certainly won't! But you've got to tell me——"

"Later," said Palke, rising, "no telling needed. We're going to get that action you're itching for."

He opened the library door, and in the hall we found a stocky little man with shrewd, whimsical eyes, inspecting the pictures with the air of a connoisseur.

"This is Mr. Rolfe, Charlie," said Palke, and the little man bowed to me. It was the first time I had met Charles Flint, though his fame reached far beyond Fleet Street.

"You look younger than I'd have judged from your portrait, Mr. Rolfe—we've got it at the office," he said. "I suppose you realise that you are News. Jimmy you're scaring me a little, a thing no man has ever done yet. If you've sold the *Wire* a pup, it's going to be your finish and mine."

"Not your's anyway," said Palke, "and I give you my word Charlie that you and you only shall be in at the death when this job clicks." He turned to me. "You remember the Deeping case? Without Charles Flint's help, I should never have hanged Deeping."

The reporter smiled at me, with the suspicion of a wink.

"I wish you well clear of Inspector Palke," he said. "The most unscrupulous policeman I ever had to do with, and the cleverest. He has the criminal mind."

"No detective can get anywhere without it, and all successful crime reporters are born with it," chuckled Palke. "If you understand the criminal's mentality and have sympathy with it, you can forecast very accurately what he will do."

"I can forecast the hell my colleagues on the other papers will raise on my getting ahead of them," said Mr. Flint, cheerfully. "There's a couple of them at the gates now, I believe, squaring the lodge-keeper!"

"We can't have that!" said Palke, hurrying to his car. "This place must be kept quiet—I'll give them what they want. Go out across the fields, Charles; meet me in the village."

He called back to me as he started his engine.

"You're off guard, Rolfe. See you later. Go anywhere you like except Black Spinney."

And he was gone. Mr. Flint smiled at me again.

"I'll leave you too, Mr. Rolfe. As we're both victims of that plausible policeman, we won't stay together and abuse him. I don't think he'll let us down. You wouldn't, I suppose, care to give me any idea what has become of Miss Jenny Craddock?"

"I would like to know myself," I said guardedly. "But if I did I wouldn't tell you."

He nodded, and stared at me thoughtfully.

"The roses of romance!" he sighed. "I was young myself once. Would you think it impertinent of me, Mr. Rolfe, if I offered you my congratulations?"

"I rather like you, Mr. Flint," I said, "but understand that if you publish anything about that in your rag, there's going to be another murder."

"I wouldn't dream of it," he protested, "unless things go so well that you'd ask me to—but I'm much afraid they won't. They seldom do when there's a job for the hangman. Well, *au revoir*."

He waved his cane to me and walked briskly away across the park, a quaint little figure. As I retreated into the house, cursing Palke's reticence and wondering if it was worth while waiting for him, the postman arrived on his push-bike with the morning mail.

There was a sheaf of missives for my father, all of which looked like bills, and a single letter for me, which I took into the gun-room and tore open hurriedly. I never learned till then how a woman's handwriting can set one's heart beating. When love is starved it feeds on crumbs.

"Ken dear, I'm beginning to hope. Things are going to come right, and I want to tell you so in case you're feeling lonely. Forgive me if I daren't say more, and I oughtn't to be writing at all. Life can't always be cruel."

"JENNY."

That was all. It was little enough. But I washed out Palke and everything else, and in five minutes I was in the car, speeding for London—though there wasn't even an address on the letter.

I felt I couldn't stand Stanways and its silence another day, and as I know Galton Park—the postmark on the letter—well-to-do suburb with a police-station and a residential hotel, I got the idea that I could locate Jenny on my own. Of course this was all against orders. I didn't care, if I could get next her. But briefly, my day was a complete frost—though one or two odd things happened—and I got back to Stanways in the evening as wise as when I started.

A suspicion reached me that Palke had somehow worked it to get me out of the way. He was uncanny in his sure judgement of the people he dealt with. But there was no sign of him, and Stanways was like a tomb for quietness. Patience is not one of my vices, and I was through with Palke. He had promised me action, and he was a four-flusher.

Then I saw that little spark of light again, among the trees, like an old friend.

THE MOTH AND THE CANDLE

THE light showed itself a little earlier than the night before, and being interested, for there was nothing else to do, I slipped quietly out into the park, and placed it definitely this time. It was not in the Spinney, as I had thought; it came from a window in the south lodge, near by.

This was curious, because the south lodge was empty, and hadn't been occupied for months. It was derelict, and no one had any business to be there.

Well, it was my business if it was anybody's. What was the light, and why was it there? Palke's prohibition was lifted, and it would have made no difference to me if it hadn't been. I stalked the spot cautiously, keeping under cover of the long belt of timber that skirted the park, and halted in the gloom, a gunshot away from the lodge. The light came from a small square window on the side nearest Stanways.

I waited for a minute or so, and it seemed as though a shadow flitted between me and the light. Was someone else abroad, doing a little scouting? I began to wish I had brought the twenty-bore along. But on second thoughts, better not. There had been too much shooting in Hertfordshire for comfort; I had a feeling that this was no occasion for lethal weapons, though the sense of a lurking danger was strong in me. The light became visible again, the shadow passed, and I crept forward till I was beneath the open casement window, rising cautiously till I could get a view of the room. It was rather like the opening scene in a play.

I don't think I was particularly surprised at the sight of my honoured parent. He was sitting comfortably at a little table in the centre, the picture of imperturbability, a writing-block before him. His pen was moving as if he were balancing

up accounts, emitting an occasional whiff from an admirable cigar whose scent drifted to me at the window.

The lodge parlour was bare save a couple of chairs and the table, on which stood a kerosene lamp; a fire burned in the open grate, and the place had a cosiness of its own in contrast to the muggy darkness outside.

My father laid his pen down and glanced over what he had written. I heard him laugh gently, as if at a thought that tickled him.

I would have betted anything I possessed that he was not within two hundred miles of Stanways, and I peered at him wonderingly. Why had he retreated to the lodge? What was the idea? He must have been here the night before, when I first saw the light, and likely enough he had never left the place. Nor was it my job to stalk him.

Why should he keep out of my way? I was on the point of going straight in to have it out with him, but for a conviction that it would end in my own discomfiture. And while I hesitated, I heard a movement outside, on the gravel path by the gate.

I saw my father shift slightly in his seat, and as he looked up I withdrew, that he might not see me there. The last thing I wanted was any sort of recognition. When I took another look through the curtains he had resumed his writing and seemed to have noticed nothing. His hearing was never as quick as mine.

A moment later there was the sound of a boot gritting on the step of the door on the farther side, the door opened quietly, and a stranger entered the little parlour.

"Lord Trent, I think?" he said. His voice marked him at once; from the Middle Western States.

My father looked up with a stare of surprise and annoyance. I paid little heed to him; all my attention was focussed on the stranger. I had a clear enough view of him as he stood

in the glow of the lamp, having closed the door quietly behind him.

He had a pair of keen, piercing black eyes, that did not falter or blink in the sudden change from darkness to the light of the room. Otherwise his appearance was rather commonplace. He was of middle height, stockily built, and wore a soft grey hat low over his forehead and a thick grey overcoat. A comfortable-looking fellow with an amiable air. But one look at him was enough for me. The danger signal was up.

"What on earth do you want?"

"I had to run you to ground, Lord Trent," said the visitor with a smile, and laid a card on the table. "But I guess you'll forgive me. I'm James Wernicke, of the *Chicago Globe-Courier*."

"I came here to be out of the way of Pressmen!" said my father. "You are wasting your time."

"But I'm not wasting yours," said Mr. Wernicke. "Listen! I am on the trail of the Corbyn case, I'm deeper into it than anyone else, not excluding the police, and I know there's only one man can give me the truth about it. Of course, you wouldn't give it away. A point of honour. That's understood."

"But one thing I've got to have—the facts about this unfortunate woman, Elaine Corbyn. That's what I'm here for. Mind you, it's bound to come out soon or late! I want it soon—quick! Now, can I induce you to come across with that story? It's worth—" he paused a moment—"it's worth just a quarter of a million—to me and my syndicate."

He gave the figure in a voice so gentle that it scarcely reached me; I would have doubted my own ears, if my father after a slight pause of amazement had not repeated it.

"A quarter of a million?—Pounds?"

"Dollars. Say fifty thousand sterling."

My father's eyes gleamed for a moment. His lips relaxed in a slow smile.

"Yours must be a remarkably wealthy paper, Mr. Wernicke!"

"Sure! The *Courier* Syndicate is one of the biggest financial corporations in the world, and it can deliver the price if it gets the goods. You have to realise, sir, that the sensation raised by this case is already world-wide. Elaine Corbyn was a Michigan woman and the *Courier* is the principal paper in the Middle West. She was also a lady with wide financial interests—as you know," said the visitor rapidly. "In short, Lord Trent, the sky is the limit as far as my paper is concerned—provided we get the story about Elaine Corbyn and what happened to her. I have full powers, as the Syndicate's representative, to deal with you."

"Mr. Wernicke," said my father, "do you take me for a damned fool?"

Wernicke raised his hands, as if with a gesture of surrender, dropped them again, and laughed.

"Nothing like it. I know you for a man of uncommon perception and intelligence, Lord Trent. Let me assure you of it."

"In that case, suppose you drop this camouflage about a paper that's offering a fortune for a mere news-story, and come to bed-rock?"

Wernicke shrugged a shoulder. His manner was calm enough, but one could see that inwardly he was tense with excitement and anxiety—and determination. He was like a man strung on taut wires.

"Thought you might prefer it the other way. To bed-rock then," he said, "I want a quick yes or no—does a quarter of a million interest you?"

"It does. You interest me enormously, Mr. Wernicke," said my father, just as cool in manner, but with the same

suppressed eagerness. "When you first came in I took you for a journalist. You have evidently heard I am a poor man. It is against every principle I have to let a sum like that go past me, if there is any means of my securing it. But how am I to know——"

"I can convince you, Lord Trent," said the visitor. "And speed's everything, with me. I'm a business man—we've got to move quick. Just one moment first."

He moved to the entrance door and turned the key in it, took a swift searching glance round the room, tried the two narrow cupboards on either side of the fireplace; one was locked and the other stood open—he passed into the inner room which was the lodge kitchen, returning immediately. After this rapid survey he stepped across to my window and closed it.

THE GUNMAN

I HAD drawn back and flattened myself against the wall, my heart thumping fast, for I wanted to see more of this gentleman before he became aware of me. So far, the luck had held. But my spirits sank as the casement swung to.

When I took a cautious look, a minute later, no sound reached me. The two men were seated, my father at the table and Wernicke opposite him, looking decidedly wary some six feet away, facing him. They were deep in earnest conversation that was completely cut off from me.

I knew my father so well. I had a clear view of his face in the lamp-light; I could read in it that resolute look, faint yet unmistakable, which I had often seen before, when there happened to be a big stake upon the board. Wernicke was the cooler of the two, outwardly at any rate; he had the poker face, one could not guess what sort of a hand he held. The situation looked so dangerous to me that my nerves were taut strung; something decisive was about to happen.

It was maddening to be shut out of it like this, behind a latched window. I tried the edge of the casement; it seemed rather a futile thing to do, but to my surprise—for I could have sworn I'd heard the bolt click home when Wernicke closed it—the window swung gently towards me and was once more open. I stopped it when there was a gap of a few inches, and again I was able to hear.

"That seems clear enough, Mr. Wernicke," said my father. "Tell me exactly what it is you want of me."

"Two vital facts," said Wernicke. "I wish to know—and to have proofs—what became of Elaine Corbyn, three nights back when she disappeared out of the morning-room at Stanways. Is she dead or living?"

My father was silent a moment.

"Now supposing, Mr. Wernicke, that I can supply those facts——"

"Cut it out," said Wernicke impatiently. "I know you can put me wise to them. I *know* you're the only person living who can. I'm not a guesser, I'm a man who works on certainties. So don't let's waste time."

"This fifty thousand—when do I receive it," asked my father.

"Directly Elaine's will is proved. You may have to wait a little—but not long. As a guarantee that we shall play straight, I'm offering you two thousand pounds down, on that table. You'll get the balance—when it comes in. You know that we wouldn't go back on you. We wouldn't dare to. Any more than you'd dare go back on us."

"Quite so, Mr. Wernicke. And two thousand pounds down. You are willing to take my word for it? That I'm delivering the goods."

"Certainly. It isn't to your interest to give me anything but the sure facts. You would lose out of the deal if you did."

My father nodded.

"Mr. Wernicke, you're dealing very fairly with me. I am to give you, privately and between ourselves, this very dangerous secret on which such vast interests depend; it affects you as much as it does me. Yet I pause and ask myself why should I? Even for such a prize as you offer? Why?"

"Wait, Lord Trent!" Wernicke leaned his elbows on his knees and stared at him. "I know what you're thinking. You believe you're safe. . . . You figure your son is going to get half a million along with Jenny Craddock . . . half share of the Power estate! If he counts on that, let me tell you you're both out! You're dead wrong."

My father sat back in his chair, and drew a deep breath.

"Mr. Wernicke, you've told me you're a quick man, and

you certainly are," he said. "So you know all about the Elaine Power will?"

"I know all about that will," said Wernicke quietly. "The part of it that benefits Jenny Craddock isn't worth much; she will never get it. And get on to this too, Lord Trent. Even if it did benefit her—and your son—what in the name of Mike would be the good of that to *you*? What would *you* ever get out of it? Why not divide the safe half of the legacy, and make sure of that? I'm offering you the cast down, and a big fortune which is a cold certainty!"

"In other words, splitting the remainder of Elaine's legacy—with you?"

"Sure! We've a big hand to play, and you hold one of the aces against us. We can't spread our cards till we know we have a sure thing. We've got to have the news confirmed. Answer quick now—do you accept my offer?"

"That's easily answered," said my father. "Let me be quite sure I've got it right. I receive fifty thousand, from the sum inherited under Elaine's will, which your representatives can't claim without definite proofs of her death. If her death is not proved the will wouldn't have the slightest value for any of us?"

"Sure! And you come across! Now then?"

"Mr. Wernicke, I don't accept any offer that you can make. The answer is, no! I'll tell you further——"

Wernicke leaned forward, surprise and anger in his eyes. His manner had completely altered.

"I don't accept your refusal, Lord Trent," he said.

"You want it in plain language?" said my father coolly. "I'll see you damned first, you thief and murderer."

Wernicke's face was congested with fury. For a moment the two men faced each other, each seated in his chair. Then with a movement quick as a striking snake, a black automatic shone in the stranger's hand, pointing at my father's stomach.

I gripped the window-sill, ready to spring, realising with dismay that there was no getting through that narrow entrance in time, for a moment uncertain whether to dash for the door. I knew that my father's refusal was final. And Wernicke knew it too.

"Listen, you big stiff! You're dealing with a cornered man, and I'm not leaving you to squeal on me—give up or you get yours now, this shuts your mouth!"

"There's no reason why you shouldn't shoot me," said my father. "It will save me a lot of trouble. I had a Wesson which the police collected, or you wouldn't have been sitting there quite so long, Wernicke. You'll certainly hang soon or late, whether it's on my account or Elaine's."

I gave a yell, and launched myself through the window. I am big made, and it was a scramble rather than a spring—my shoulder hit the side of the frame and I sprawled on to the floor of the room with the wind knocked out of me. Before I hit the boards I heard an astonished cry, a smash and the report of a pistol. It was like one of those confused crashes of sound you hear in a Wagner orchestra.

I staggered to my feet in a rush of cold air, the front door stood wide, Inspector Palke was standing by me regarding with mild interest the scene on the floor, where two figures sprawled in a brief but impressive mix-up.

The one on top was Begbie. Miraculously, from the unknown, he had somehow descended like an avalanche upon Wernicke, who for a few seconds fought furiously. My father was standing up beside his chair. I never saw anything more professional than the way the bulky Begbie mastered his man. A couple of quick heaves, the click of a pair of handcuffs, and Wernicke was immobilised. The Wesson pistol lay on the boards a yard out of his reach. Palke picked it up.

"That's all right," said Inspector Palke with a sigh of satisfaction.

JAKE MAGUIRE

I NEVER before saw my father so thoroughly taken aback. He paid no attention to the handcuffed prisoner; he was staring at Inspector Begbie.

"Where the devil did *you* spring from?" he said with cold disapproval.

"From the cupboard, sir," said the panting Begbie. He picked up the Wesson automatic. "Never counted on his using this thing—for a moment I really thought he'd got you."

"I really thought he had too," said my father, "it seemed to me I was to be the third casualty. I did have an idea that Palke might be somewhere within call, but never that I'd find myself indebted to Begbie, the human avalanche. Thank you, Begbie!"

"It did look a close call," said Palke, "but I've a couple of watchers outside, and I had him covered myself from the porch window; there wasn't all that risk. Of all things I hate using a gun; they're fussy about it at the Yard even in murder cases, and it's unprofessional. Begbie has done such useful work in this case that I thought it only fair he should finish it with full credit."

He took the prisoner by his overcoat collar and heaved him into a chair where the lamp shone on his face. The man got his breath back, and was wrenching at his wrists and glaring at us venomously. I don't think I ever saw a more dangerous looking animal; now that his hat was off and I saw his low flat forehead with its knobbed temples, it came home to me that we had trapped our man at last.

"Ken," said my father reproachfully, "I suppose nothing will cure you of this habit of butting into delicate situations when you're not wanted."

"Mr. Rolfe was naturally a bit anxious about you, sir," said Palke, "and after all his being here saves us time. Have you ever seen this fellow before?"

He turned to me.

"I can swear to one thing, it's the man who was spying in at the gun-room window ten days ago, and that was the time Elaine saw him," said I, and added quickly, "it's a thousand pities he didn't stop a bullet that night."

"That's a lie anyway!" snapped the man. "I was never near this place till now."

"I'd advise you to save your breath till you're in the dock," said Palke, "you'll have your chance then, Jake Maguire. It *is* Maguire, isn't it?"

"He introduced himself to me as Wernicke," said my father mildly. "But we understood each other from the first, and I never knew even a Pressman so greedy for information—or offering such a price for it."

"It was now or never, Jake, wasn't it," said Palke. "Sad to see three millions going west when there was only one man who could put you wise in time—even at fifty-fifty. Take him away, Begbie."

The prisoner turned to my father, his face livid with fury.

"You damned stool-pigeon!" he snarled.

"Mr. Wernicke," said Dad, "or Maguire, or whatever your trade name is, I'm not a purist. I think Inspector Palke is justified in using any means he pleases, rather than let you slip through his fingers. I could have forgiven you and even commended you for killing Linke," added my father, "but I had the greatest admiration for Elaine Power. The fact that you tried to shoot me doesn't weigh with me for a moment, but I hope they hang you on her account."

"I'd sooner swing for *you*!" retorted the gunman, "and none of you have anything on me, except *that*!" he nodded to the broken pane where the Wesson's bullet had crashed

through the glass. Palke made a sign to his colleague, who led the captive out.

"I'd like to shake hands with you before you go, Begbie," said my father. "It must have been very uncomfortable in that cupboard. Any little soreness that there was between us is forgotten."

Begbie reddened and rather awkwardly took the hand that my father held out, before he disappeared with his charge.

"I'll shake too if you don't mind, sir," I said a little huskily. "I'd be proud if I had your nerve, and if I ever—I mean if you ever felt sore with me, remembering what a fool I've been——"

"My dear boy!" said Dad, giving me a pleasant grip, "you've inherited the nerve of the family, if not its brains, and I've never felt sore with you. But if there's a diploma for nerve," he added, "let me hand it to this skilful angler, Palke, who has not only the credit for one of the cleverest captures on record, but didn't hesitate to use me as live-bait. No doubt he thinks me rather a queer fish, and he's probably right."

Inspector Palke smiled, and turned to me.

"Mr. Rolfe, your father acquits me. This murder gang found they had been double-crossed by somebody who was evidently playing for his own hand. They were steered to the conclusion that the man who was holding them up is Lord Trent. They couldn't abandon a prize that so much had been risked for, and that was still within their grasp at the cost of one quick bid for success. I didn't tell your father just what he was up against; but I made my own arrangements for his protection."

"I've seen timber-wolves trapped in Idaho," said I, "but never anything quite like that. He was right when he said he was a cornered man. Still, I don't see why he had to——"

"And now," said Palke, "I'm taking you along for a little run with me now. My car's waiting the other side of Black Spinney."

"If you're going to take Ken away," said my father, "I'll get back to the house; it's devilish uncomfortable here. Tell me Palke, will that man hang? Can you bring it home to him? He seemed very confident."

"Confidence is a natural habit in crooks," said Palke. "Yes, Jake is fixed."

My father nodded. He thrust the papers from the table into his pocket, and went out without looking at me. Palke was wrapping a silk handkerchief carefully round the Wesson pistol.

"You're a sceptic about guns, Rolfe," he said, picking up the empty shell from the floor, "but you'll hardly disagree that this one has been fired."

He stopped for a moment outside the lodge to say a word to a shadowy figure that emerged from the bushes. Then we both went away together down the south lane, stepping briskly. He took my arm, and I heard him laughing quietly to himself; he did not answer when I questioned him but hurried me on. Past Black Spinney and down the cart road beyond, we came upon a car—tucked snugly back among the bushes.

"Get in," said Palke, and in a few minutes we were clear of the lane and whizzing south along the main road to London.

"Gad, what a night!" I said, drawing a free breath for the first time. "You took a most infernal risk, Palke!"

"I told you I shouldn't stick at a risk," he replied. "You must remember that you people have been taking chances from the first, and neither of you can complain."

"Did you know I was at that window?"

"Yes, and decided to leave you there. You had a place

intended for somebody else. Did you notice it wouldn't shut?"

"Yes, Maguire tried to shut it, and I got it open again all right."

"I fixed it that way," said Palke. "It's lucky you showed some sense, you gave me an anxious time. But so long as we've got our man——"

"You called him Maguire. Palke, who *is* Maguire?"

"The gunman? Now we've got him I think we shall find he answers to the name of Maguire, as the lost dog advertisements say. Getting him was the rub. If you want a certainty, label him the man who killed Linke. Number One."

The speedometer touched fifty-three. We were on the main route; the glow of London tinged the sky, away in the south.

"You're something of a speeder yourself, Rolfe. But we're a little farther ahead than on the night when you ran a Chrysler with a pricked tyre out of Euston down the Great North Road and gave the Hertfordshire Constabulary a derelict corpse to trail, when their hands were too full already."

"That seems like ten years ago," said I. "Do you mean I've got to account for Spike O'Dowd? It *was* Spike, wasn't it?"

Palke chuckled reassuringly in the gloom.

"Headquarters won't trouble you with Spike O'Dowd. Nor his mate, whom we found nearly two weeks ago."

"His mate! The other man in the Buick car? I always thought——"

"You were right. He got away on his two feet as far as the high road, and managed to get a lift to Wexford Infirmary. By the time we traced him there he was dying. His story was that he'd been run into by a lorry in the dark. He gave nothing away; a dying man hasn't anything to

gain by squealing. No loss to society. Jason Krupp—three convictions for robbery with violence; an old associate of Spike's and one of the same breed—a killer."

"Was he Maguire's man?"

"By arrangement. No doubt at all Maguire put those two London thugs, Spike and Jason, on to Elaine with the jewel-case for a bait, and the warning to leave no evidence behind. If you hadn't crashed their car they'd have shot up the three of you. Of course, I can't prove that now; and I don't need to."

"Compared with Michael Power, none of these people matter vitally to us; they are pawns in the game. I make one exception, Jake's partner—the Silent Woman, who walks in the dark as all felines do. And it's my belief we ought to have allowed her to walk free a little longer. But there it is; now we've got her we can only make the best of her."

"Jake's partner!" I said. "The woman? You mean to say you've got her?"

"Arrested this morning. The French have a proverb, 'By night all cats are black.' But however difficult to pick out against a dark background, they become conspicuous when they venture out in broad daylight. Yes, we've got her, but another difficulty is that she remains as silent as ever. And in this country the Third Degree is officially forbidden. You won't agree with me, but I hold that in murder cases it shouldn't be barred."

"Palke!" I said, anxiously, "is she——"

"I haven't seen her myself yet," said Palke, "but I suggest we call her Kathleen, and I want you to meet her. Meanwhile Rolfe, imitate her gift of silence until we reach Vintner Street police station."

KATHLEEN

WHEN Palke is in that sort of mood there's no coping with him. The lights of London were rapidly drawing nearer; he was silent till we got into the traffic stream.

"We'll be there in a few minutes, and I may as well tell you how we got her," he said. "The data that were strung together at Stanways, so far as they could be connected with this woman, were broadcasted to all stations and led to the arrest in London this morning—by a C Division policeman on ordinary patrol duty. He knows nothing about the Stanways case beyond the ten-line order that I sent out."

"His Inspector 'phoned me and got instructions. The woman refused to give any account of herself. I was busy getting Jake, and she'd have been very little use to us if we hadn't pulled Jake in."

"Now here's another point, Rolfe, touching this woman. Michael Power has been tailed up ever since he left jail. He was convicted under a purser's name, which, as there was no earlier record of him, made him difficult to trace. But all correspondence directed to that name has been tapped by the New York D.C.I. Michael's mail was waiting for him at an address to which he went soon after his release—all this is elementary—police organisation."

"Among three letters for Michael was one in a woman's hand. Its contents were quite innocuous; except that it contained a 500-dollar bill."

"Now that might mean anything. The sender must have known when Michael was due out of the jug, and a curious thing about it is that it had been mailed from this side and bore a London postmark. Sam Collins flashed a telephoto of it back to me three days ago."

"All this letter says is: 'Await instructions. Market rising.' That's for Michael. It was written on the note-paper of the Liverpool Street Hotel, with a pen-stroke drawn through the address heading. Anyone who drifts into the writing-room there can use that paper. It's signed 'John Evans.' And not a doubt about it; 'John Evans' is female."

"That looks promising, doesn't it, Rolfe? But to fasten it on to the sender, unless we get something more that will clinch it, is going to be a puzzler. It may be a blind trail; in fact it looks like one. I have a hunch," said Palke thoughtfully, "that this woman is going to beat me on one of the most vital points of the case. However, I'll introduce you to the lady at once."

We turned out of the West End traffic into the quiet backwater of Vintner Street. A Divisional Inspector at the police-station received us in his office. He greeted Palke cordially, and was very reserved towards me.

"Nothing through from New York about No. 2 yet?" said Palke. "You cabled Sam?"

"We had this through at eight o'clock," said the Inspector, handing him a sheet of buff paper. "There isn't much to it."

Palke glanced over it.

"Not so bad," he said, "and now lead us to the lady; don't bring her out. I'll see her where she is. Hasn't said anything?"

"Nothing," said the Inspector, and a minute later a warder led us down an echoing stone corridor and unlocked a door with a little grating at the height of the eye, and swung it open. Palke said a word to the Inspector and the warder, who both retired.

"Step out, madam," said Palke, civilly.

The vague figure in black sitting on the bench in that steel and concrete box rose and came slowly forward. It was a moment I had been dreading. Then came a feeling of

relief, as the light fell on her face. I didn't know this woman. And yet, when I looked at her closely, I wasn't so sure.

Palke glanced from her face to mine. She stood before us without a word; a woman of apparently about forty, though she might have been much younger. Her face was weather-beaten and ravaged; a pair of fierce dark eyes stared at me contemptuously. Her forehead was low and broad, and her figure slim, her lips a thin, hard line. But she must have been an uncommonly good-looking woman once.

She turned to Palke with a menacing stare. I've seldom seen anyone who impressed me more. The dim light suited her; she looked a creature of darkness. Evidently she was not in the least afraid of us; she looked as courageous as a cornered cat, and as vicious. The sight of her made me feel creepy.

"What am I here for!" she said harshly. "What am I charged with?"

"Not charged with anything, yet; detained. Just detained, madam," said Palke.

"It's some fool mistake!"

"It was a bigger mistake to send that message, Katty," said Palke gently. "Mike sailed on Tuesday."

She looked at him steadily.

"I've sent no message to anyone. Who is Mike? I guess you're a fool."

"Exactly what Jake says. We got Jake to-night. By the way, this is young Mr. Rolfe, Lord Trent's son. I see he doesn't know you. But you know him."

Then the woman's eyes blazed red at him.

"To hell with you!" she said, "you've got nothing on me!"

"Just what they all say," sighed Palke. He beckoned to the warder, who re-locked the cell.

"That's all for the present," said Palke to the Inspector, as we went out. "Don't let a word leak out concerning that

woman. Detain her. If she makes trouble—which she won't—charge her with being a suspected person and ask for a remand."

He got into the car and turned north once more.

"I've a fairly good nerve, Rolfe," he said, "but I wouldn't be shut up in the cell with that woman if you offered me the Chief Commissionership. What did you make of her? Notice anything?"

"Her eyes; and that queer way she has of turning on you when she's roused. She reminded me of Maguire."

"She is Katty Maguire, Jake's sister. The woman whose flat shoes you saw the prints of outside the morning-room the night Elaine was shot. But she's something more than that, Rolfe. Just what she is—I wonder if we shall prove that before the curtain drops."

He relapsed into gloom. I couldn't conceal my own relief.

"I thought it was Mrs. Jessop you'd got! Of course, I was a fool——"

"Not at all," said Palke. "That smooth black-silk house-keeper of yours was within an inch of finding herself in the cells at Wheatbridge three nights ago, and if it had been left to Begbie that's where she'd have landed. She lied to me, when I questioned her—no doubt you noticed it.

"Her reasons for being out that night wouldn't bear examination, but they're no business of yours or mine, we'll pass them. She knew your father was suspected of having a hand in the killing of Linke, and she'd say nothing that might give him away. With all her failings, she's a good servant, and she's loyal. She would have lied better if she had been sober; maybe you noticed that too. I don't want to be tactless, but Stanways is really—rather a queer household."

"I'll run you back home, but you'll have to get out

of it in the morning. The toughest part is still to come, and I shall want you."

"There are rocks ahead for you, Rolfe; and for me. The Stanways case isn't solved, and I'm taking a big chance myself. What is the link between Michael and the Maguires? Jake killed Stephen, Michael's brother. For that I can warrant that Jake will hang. It's the only certainty. I can prove that Katty Maguire was in Black Spinney at the time of the killing; I can show that she was at Stanways on the night of the 14th. None of this is evidence against Michael Power—the three-million-dollar claimant."

"He'll never claim, Palke!" said I.

"Won't he?" said Palke, quietly. "I would consider myself badly left if he doesn't claim." He paused, and trod hard on the accelerator. "This is the last case I shall ever handle. It's not going as well as I could wish. Still, I'm glad to see you looking so cheerful. Is it because you suppose all this brings you any nearer to Jenny Craddock?"

"It's got to be soon. I've had all I can stand!"

"Look here, Rolfe," he said, seriously. "I know you don't care what happens to me; but if you really want a disaster to Jenny Craddock, just butt in again and you'll get one. I can't issue orders to you. But I want your word of honour as a—well, as a member of the Stanways household—to stand clear till I give you the signal."

"When?"

"When the *Carthusian* is docked, and Elaine Power's widower comes along. It's going to be a day of trouble."

"For Michael! I'll bet it will."

"For all of us, maybe. He's due Friday. Trouble's coming for somebody. That's the only certainty in the Stanways case!"

XLIII

MICHAEL

I LEFT Stanways next morning. One or two things had to be settled up first. But I was never more pleased at anything than getting away from that happy English home. It was a choice between that and being interviewed to death.

The place was besieged by journalists from seven o'clock onwards. Those early press reports had been so meagre that the papers and the public didn't seem to have got on to the full sensational value of the case for the first forty-eight hours. All that was changed now, and reporters kept popping up whichever way one went. The lodge-keeper couldn't cope with them; I shouldn't have been surprised to find one in my bath.

It occurred to me that Mr. Charles Flint of the *Wire* had found a way with Palke's help of keeping his colleagues off the territory on that first morning; he was evidently content with that for he didn't come near Stanways again. By this time one might as well have tried to keep out a pack of hounds in full cry. And I was the last person who had seen Elaine alive.

I like newspaper men and find them the best of company, but the thing was getting on my nerves and at eight o'clock I threw a few necessities into a grip and effected a quiet sneak down to the garage. There I was confronted by McRae the chauffeur, busy over the Rolls-Royce.

I thought he had left long ago. He looked at me sombrely and sympathetically.

"I have her ready, if you're for gettin' out o' this, sir," he said. "Unless ye've any prejudice against ridin' in a dead woman's car."

"I'll take the Chrysler," I said, "and see here, McRae,

don't tell the newspaper men anything; best answer no questions."

"Them fellys. They'll not get a word out o' me," he growled. "Forbye I know nothing but what I've read in the papers. A black business. I never liked this job—I couldn't tell ye why."

"Who is paying your wages?" I asked, pausing a moment.

"His lordship. On behalf o' Miss Craddock," he said sourly, and turned his back on me, fumbling under the bonnet of the Rolls.

The man's manner was repellent. Till then I had rather liked McRae. I wasted no more words on him, got out the Chrysler, and streaked out of Stanways Park by the south road. As I passed Black Spinney I noticed a bevy of people trampling about in it, and as far as I could see there were no police about the place at all.

I left the car at a crowded garage in Barnet, with the idea of shelving all chance of being traced, and reached London via the Tube from Golder's Green. Palke had given me a hint where to go if things got too lively at Stanways, so that I could keep in touch with him.

I finished my journey at an obscure little hotel near Victoria Station, which turned out to be very comfortable, and committed an offence against the statutes at once by signing the register as J. Ralph, which is close enough to my own name to bring me to the telephone if Palke rang me up. I hadn't been there half an hour when I found my father was already an inmate. We met in a little smoking-room on an upper floor.

"My title has gone west—like my reputation, if I ever had such a thing," he said. "And remember, my dear boy, that while here we are not connected with each other in any way. But that's no reason why we shouldn't be friends, until Fate rings the bell and hands out the reckoning."

That was his way. He didn't rub it in; didn't tell me I had dropped the biggest brick on record, or remind me of anything that was past. Dad was always generous to me. There was not a father and son in creation who were better friends than he and I from that time on. But we didn't advertise it. And nobody concerned themselves with us. Unless you go out of your way to attract attention, London is a great city for minding its own business; we were a couple of obscure boarders in a respectable back-street hotel and we welcomed obscurity. But we had some intimate talks in that little smoking-room, and I look back to it now as a time of revelation.

I had little to do for the next few days but watch the papers. There was not a word about the detention of Jake and Katty Maguire. The Stanways Case seemed to have sunk into the journalistic backwaters, as cases do when the sources dry up, and a sensational political scandal intervened and captured the public imagination, shelving for awhile Elaine Corbyn's mystery.

Suddenly, on the fifth day, it blazed out again like a comet. And this time it was not exclusive to the *Daily Wire*. All the papers had got it, and gave it the big headlines that always mark a case of the first interest.

THE STANWAYS MYSTERY

WHERE IS MICHAEL POWER?

6,000,000 DOLLAR WILL

... An even more sensational feature of this case than the disappearance of Elaine Corbyn's body from Stanways House, is the discovery of a will, unquestionably made and signed by her, dated nineteen days ago. It was dated November 8th. On the night of the 14th occurred the tragic and still unexplained event, the shooting, and the mysterious

removal of the testator's body by some person unknown, leaving behind nothing but a discharged pistol, which it is already established was her own property.

Here followed the text of Elaine's will, accurate to the last comma.

This document, it is declared, is legally attested by witnesses and was undoubtedly drawn up by the missing woman, and bears her signature.

Not less interesting is the fact which now comes to light, that a sum of £20,000 stands to Miss Craddock's credit at Lloyds Bank, deposited by Elaine Power's instructions to the bank on November 3rd.

What light does this throw on the mystery? It suggests on the face of it that Elaine Corbyn had a premonition that led her to set her affairs in order. But why? Apart from the will, she made this provision for Jane Craddock. £20,000. A trifle, compared to twelve hundred thousand sterling, yet a substantial sum.

What value has the will? None, unless or until the death of the testatrix is proved. Then indeed it becomes of immense value to the two beneficiaries.

Where is Michael Power? He is not, it is stated, at present in England, nor is it known that he has ever visited this country. Miss Jane Craddock, on the other hand, is now in London, and was at Stanways House on the night of the 14th. . . .

The following statement is issued to the Press Association on behalf of Miss Craddock by Messrs. Stanhope and Strachey, Attorneys, Lincolns Inn Fields.

"We are instructed by our client, Miss Jane Craddock, to issue this declaration:

'I, Jane Craddock, wish to state that I never wished or expected to be named as a legatee in Elaine Power's will.

'But should I be required to act as her executor, I wish to say definitely that I shall not oppose any claim to which Michael Power is entitled by the terms of her will, for I know it was always her wish that his right to inherit should be recognised, and in her testament she has made this clear.

Until the truth is known there can be no claim either by Michael Power or myself.

'In the meantime I shall not in any case accept or retain the £20,000 which has been credited to me by no wish of mine. Since I have the right to dispose of it, I shall surrender this sum to Elaine Power's husband, if he is living.'

The paper rustled in my hand as I read that clause; and I heard my father's voice close behind me.

'Isn't that like Jenny!' he said.

He was reading the paper over my shoulder, smiling with a queer twinkle in his eyes. We looked at each other for a moment, and he gave a shrug.

'Stanhope and Strachey—shrewd people, I should think. A woman takes some stopping when she makes up her mind to anything,' said my father.

'What does Palke mean by it!'

'It's ill work guessing what Palke means,' said Dad, 'but for my part I've generally found he means just what he says.'

'Do you suppose Power will face Jenny and her lawyers?'

'What else can he do? If he delays doing so, now that the affair is in the *Wire* immediate suspicion will fall on him. Innocence is the only card left him to play. And it's a devilish difficult card to lead.'

There was a knock at the door, the hotel waiter appeared.

'Wanted on the telephone, sir,' he said.

I slipped into the booth across the passage. A buzz or two from the receiver, and Palke's smooth, friendly voice caressed my ear.

'That you, Rolfe? . . . Michael landed this morning. Now in London.'

Queer, the effect that message had on me, though I was expecting it. The telephone booth seemed blotted out and I could see Black Spinney, and the morning-room at Stanways . . . Elaine stretched on the red-stained carpet . . . Jenny

lying in my arms like a dead woman—half a dozen scenes flashing at me in the fraction of a second. Then I got hold of myself.

"Yes!" I said, "... what are you doing?"

"Me?" said Palke. "Nothing. Michael has made an appointment with Strachey's—eleven to-morrow. I'll call for you at ten."

"Palke," I said, "will there be——?"

"Hell to pay," said Palke, and rang off.

I slept badly that night; scenes that I most wanted to forget haunted me till the dawn broke, and I wondered what the day would bring with it.

We are entering upon an age of prejudice against even legal killing; but let the abstract humanitarian consider whether his views might change if murder crept into his house on silent feet. There are crimes I can easily condone. But I'm old-fashioned enough to believe that the gallows and the electric chair are instruments of social value.

It was long after ten when I got away next morning. Palke was late, and unusually silent. Not a word could I get out of him till we had parked the car on the west side of the Square and walked across to the rendezvous. By that time I had lost all faith that anything would come of it.

There are more fashionable squares in London, but none more imposingly respectable than Lincoln's Inn Fields, that stronghold of family lawyers. Number 400 was a sober old Georgian house, its doorposts ranged with brass plates all bearing the name of the clan Strachey. We were received in a small side office by Mr. Pitt Strachey, an alert, youngish man with keen eyes and a persuasive manner; not at all like the grave elderly chief I had expected to see. Palke presented me and the lawyer shook hands warmly.

"Delighted, Mr. Rolfe! I would have liked to have met you earlier, but the Inspector was against it, and we've half an hour before us. You'll find some friends upstairs; Lord Trent is here already. And of course my client, Miss Craddock. This way."

The only hint Palke had given me was that I should meet Jenny, and I wished it could have been in any place but that. Of course I knew she had to be in it. When I was shown into a wide-panelled room upstairs with windows overlooking the Square, at first sight I thought it was empty. A vacant desk and a typewriter on one side; a long table with seats round it as if for a board meeting, and five deep leather easy chairs. In one of them, so small and silent that I had overlooked him altogether, was Charles Flint of the *Wire*.

He lounged there dreaming, a pipe between his teeth; the first I should think that had ever been smoked in that sedate business-like room. He didn't rise, but extended a hand and gave mine the friendliest pressure.

"You have been in hiding, Mr. Rolfe? I hope this is your lucky day! And mine." He shook his head mournfully. "Palke has made use of me shamelessly—now it is my turn. Can he deliver the goods? If not the *Wire* will break him. I get five hours start with the scoop."

The lawyer smiled, a shade uneasily?

"I am confident Mr. Flint will be discreet," he said, and opened a door at the far end of the room. "If you'll step through here, Mr. Rolfe, the Inspector and I will have a word with you before we proceed."

I stepped through.

I had thought I understood the case; that I saw all the way through it. I had been let deep enough into it—farther than anyone except Palke himself. But when I returned to the front office ten minutes later I felt very much as a man

does who puts his horse at a fence and finds a twenty-foot ditch gaping on the other side. . . .

I found everybody very silent in that gloomy panelled room. My father sat at the table, watching me thoughtfully. Palke's face was utterly expressionless. Little Charles Flint was scribbling on a sketch-block that rested on his knee. Pitt Strachey fiddled with a paper-knife and couldn't keep his hands still.

For my part I was certain that Michael Power wouldn't come at all.

The black marble clock over the hearth was striking eleven, and the sound of it jarred my nerves. Before it had finished an electric bell clinged below stairs. A clerk brought up a note which he handed to Strachey, who nodded to us and went down.

Palke was sniffing at the carnation in his button-hole, his eyes half closed in appreciation. A shuffling of feet and a sound of voices on the landing. . . . Strachey opened the door, and with a rather strained smile that didn't sit well on him, announced his visitor:

"Mr. Michael Power."

XLIV

THE MAN WHO KNEW

So we had him at last.

I had been dreading that moment for a week. Many a time I had felt that what one really wanted was to get a good tight hold on Power's throat and save all this police stuff. And now, I was not sure. I didn't know what to make of this big bareheaded man in the heavy black overcoat, who faced us all with steady eyes and a firm mouth.

I had expected either a brazen crook of the Maguire kind, or some mean little wriggler whose greed was greater than his fears. But I had never in my life seen anybody more convincingly respectable than Michael Power.

He had blue-grey, kindly eyes, with wrinkled crow's-feet at the corners; the eyes of a man who had seen trouble; his hair iron-grey, at the temples white. Except for the width across his temples he seemed to me totally unlike Linke in every way, and I began to wonder if some basic mistake hadn't been made. He was evidently suppressing deep emotion and anxiety, and no wonder. With simple dignity he turned to Strachey, who was noiselessly closing the door.

"Say, Mr. Strachey—I understood this interview was to be private. Who are these gentlemen?"

"Lord Trent—at whose house this tragic affair which we all deplore occurred," said Strachey, "Mr. Kenyon Rolfe, his son——"

"And mighty glad I am you're both here!" said Michael Power. "When I say privacy, I don't mean secrecy. What I want is the truth."

"The truth, I hope, is within the four walls of this room Mike," said Palke. "It's been long in coming."

"The truth! I look for it every day, like Diogenes with his

lantern," said little Flint sympathetically, "and it's hard to come by, Mr. Power. I am a waif of Fleet Street, a nobody; Charles Flint of the *Wire*. Just an *amicus curiæ*—a friend of the Court."

"And Mr. Palke," interrupted Strachey, but Power, paying no attention to him, had fixed Palke with his eye from the first, and walked up to him.

"Say, what's your grade? Captain?"

"Inspector we call it, this side," said Palke. "You knew I was a policeman, Michael?"

"Did I know!" said Power. "What are the police for, Cap'en Palke? The protection of the innocent, and the punishment of evil-doers—some such bunk as that I learned when I was a kid! That's the theory of police work, isn't it?"

"Will they own to it, if they make a mistake! Take a look at me! I come of an unlucky family—had to do with rotten folk most of my life; steered wide of them and went straight. Do you know where I've been for a year past? Could you tell what I was? Can you see the prison look in a man's eyes? They say it's a thing he never gets rid of. Do you police believe that?"

"Look at me, all of you! Eighteen months of hell, shut out of the world—put away. And as innocent as you are Captain—Inspector, whatever you call yourself. Just put away!"

Palke nodded.

"I've known such things happen. I've put away such a lot of people myself," he said. "So you were put away, Michael. That's tough luck on any man. I'm in charge of this case, and when you have dealt with Mr. Strachey, who is acting for his client, Miss Jane Craddock—I'll have one or two questions to ask you."

"You can begin with them!" said Power.

"You are Michael Power; have you any evidence of identity?"

The visitor laid a passport on the table.

"Correct. Your own name; and photo," said Palke. "I've nothing to do with your conviction in Canada; you were released November 10th, and you sailed from New York, November 14th, at 4 p.m. Five hours—without counting the difference between New York and Greenwich time—before Elaine Power was found shot at Stanways. So you could have known nothing of it, unless it appeared in the ship's radio bulletins, until you reached England?"

"Do you think I haven't told myself that a hundred times since I landed?" said Power, bitterly. "Is that all the police know; or are they as dumb here as in Quebec?"

"The police seldom know as much as they'd like to about any case. You should be able to help them. You are Elaine Power's husband; you married her in '27 at Dupont, Michigan. Did you know at that time that she was likely to inherit Benjamin Slade's money?"

"You've got it all wrong-end first—as the police mostly do," said Power quietly. "Now listen. When I asked Ellen to marry me I'd have taken her without a cent. I'd never heard of Benjy Slade. She was the only woman I ever wanted; but I was an oldish fellow for a girl like her."

"But get this, and get it good! When I came back at her a year later and asked her again, *then* I knew about Benjy, and believed he was dead—as everybody did. I heard he'd owned some land in the oil country, and who he'd left it to I didn't know—but I guessed some day she might come into a bit of money. That's for you—I'm owing to it! A man needn't be crazy because he's in love, an' that last time I offered myself and agreed to wait till she could come to me handing her all I'd got because she needed help—why, I had to safeguard myself to see I didn't lose everything!

We made a contract between us and it was fair—ask the world if it wasn't fair! That anybody should believe Benjy had had millions to leave—why, even the police would never have credited it! No one on earth as much as guessed it—till it happened. I never learned of it till I came out, ten days back."

"News! There was never any news of her . . . nothing but a scrap in a paper weeks old, that Elaine Corbyn was gone to England, or going. See that!" He gave a faded news-clipping to Palke, crumpled and soiled. "Guess what I'd have had for tearin' that out of a sheet in the jail library—that's where I got it, and the first I'd heard of her in years—even that had to come to me in jail. Tried the office where that was published—they'd tell me nothing, and all I found in two days search was her name in a liner's passenger list." He thrust it before Palke. "*Elaine Corbyn*—we used to laugh over that dago name she was christened. . . . She was always Ellen to me."

His voice was husky and broken; I couldn't get my gaze away from those haunted eyes of his. The man fascinated me. Despite his emotion, his manner was amazingly restrained and convincing. I caught a glance from Charlie Flint, puzzled and anxious.

"Nothing about me there!" said Power, pointing to the crumpled paragraph in Palke's hand. "Corbyn . . . she never used my name. That was right enough—that was in the contract. I was just a dead-beat, lost in a Canuke jail—she couldn't know that; I was dead for all she could tell." The Adam's apple worked in his throat; he turned away for a moment and was silent, then faced us again. "Honest to God, I believe she tried to find me. . . . I believe she did her best!"

"So it was up to me, and I'm a man that's hard to stop, as you'll know before you've done with me. I sailed by the

first boat, an' when the papers were put aboard at Queens-town I got this news—this awful news. And yesterday this!" He flung a tattered copy of the *Wire* on Palke's desk, his lip quivering. "... Stanhope and Strachey, Lincoln's Inn . . . and a statement from a girl I never heard of who figures in poor Ellen's will—offering me money! Damn you and your money, and Slade's too, that brought her to this! And here am I, of my own free will, facing you, asking you for the truth, and played for a liar by all of you!"

"Steady, Michael," said Palke gently.

"Steady! It's easy to say steady to a man who's up against it like this. Ellen would have treated me white . . . she always played fair, and now she's gone can any of you give her back to me? You, or your tame lawyer, or this Lord What-is-it who sneers at me because he thinks I came here for money!"

"Mr. Power, I know my own weaknesses too well to sneer at any man," said my father. "I have an unfortunate belief," he added, "that nine hundred and ninety-nine men out of a thousand find money dangerously attractive, but I am quite prepared to believe you are the thousandth man."

"Mr. Power, let me make our position clear," said Strachey. "If yours is as impregnable as it appears to be, you have nothing to fear. Mine is a simple one; I am to offer the sum of £20,000 to the husband of Elaine Power, providing legal proof of his identity is forthcoming; on behalf of my client. I don't say I approve of this, but I shall carry out my instructions. It is open to him, of course, to decline it if he wishes. Do *you* accept or decline?"

For a fraction of a moment Michael Power hesitated.

That moment placed Power among the discards.

I think it was the expression of his face more than anything else. Till then a growing doubt had crept into me; a fear that after all we were arraigning an innocent man.

And I don't believe I was the only one in the room who thought so.

But now—I understood the vital difference there is between reading a trial in the paper, and seeing the witness in the box.

Power turned his back on Palke, and facing Strachey, seemed to grow an inch or two taller.

"Was that Ellen's money?" he said.

"It was."

"Then this girl, who's giving it up, feels she has no right to it? That's queer. Does she give up her half share, of what poor Ellen could leave—do I give up mine, for this £20,000? Is that it?"

"Of course not."

"Listen now!" Power struck his hand on the desk. "I'd fling that money in your face and hers, only that there's one thing on this earth I need it for—to find Ellen! To find her, dead or living, an' if there's anyone drove her to her death—if there's been foul play—to put them that's guilty where they belong. Let me see this girl—and I'll say the same to her in front of you all. I'll try whether I can do what you and your sleuths have failed on!"

"You may not realise how the Law ties our hands," said Palke. "Of course, Michael, you would rather have found your wife living, than twenty thousand pounds—or even three millions?"

"Would I—what?" said Power hotly. "It's only one of your trade would dare say a thing like that to a man. Would you like it said to you?" He clenched his hands, and let them fall despairingly to his sides. "My Ellen! Look here—look at that . . . my marriage certificate . . . Michael Power . . . Elaine Corbyn . . . And me that's come three thousand miles seekin' her. . . . Is that enough?"

"Plenty," said Palke, and rose. "Now we can get to it.

Michael, if I've failed I can at least refer you to somebody who has succeeded, and to whom the credit of this case is due. This seems a good time to do it."

He pressed the bell, and drew out the chair from before the typing desk.

The door at the end of the room opened, and Elaine Corbyn walked in; her own cool, authoritative self. . . .

I never saw her look more attractive, nor more unconcerned. It was a wonderful moment. She glanced at us all with a little nod, and just that faint smile which always meant trouble for somebody.

My father rose courteously; so did Charles Flint. As she came forward every man in the room was on his feet. None of us spoke.

Michael, his flood of eloquence dried up, looked at her for a moment or two and turned inquiringly to Palke.

"Who is this lady?"

"This," said Palke, "is Jane Craddock Carthew, of the Records Office, Department of Criminal Investigation, New York, that city from which you sailed in such a hurry. Your heart's desire is achieved, Michael—she has put this gang of crooks where they belong. And if I could wish that she had remained in the safety of the Records Office, it is not because she has beaten me on my own ground."

Elaine smiled.

"If you've finished dropping bouquets, Jimmy, we'll wind this case up," she said, and seating herself calmly at the typewriter she began to tap out a heading without taking the slightest notice of any of us.

Palke turned to Power with an eye as hard as flint.

"I have bad news for you, Michael," he said. "Such things seldom come singly. You lose three millions, which it is quite possible that you might have got away with. You

also lose £20,000. We find you fail to qualify for either claim."

"Here's the original will that Elaine Corbyn signed on the day of your marriage with her." He laid on the desk a folded document, torn across in four pieces. "The will made at Stanways has balanced accounts by bringing you and your ingenious friends to justice."

"Lastly, one or two facts which you have missed by being so far out of range; Stephen Power is dead. Your brother-in-law, Jake Maguire, is at Hertford Station on a charge of murder. Kathleen Maguire—is under arrest in London, accessory to the same charge. As for you, Michael, with the alibi, we have been waiting for you since you sailed."

THE FINAL WITNESS

POWER stared at him, swaying slightly on his feet. The man's face was grey and mottled; for the first time there was unmistakable terror in his eyes.

"One more witness you have to meet," said Palke, and opened the farther door again.

Jenny walked in; rather timid, rather pale, but her self-possession came back to her as she faced Michael Power. He stared at her as if turned to stone.

"Ellen! . . ." he said huskily. "Ellen! . . ."

It was Jane Carthew who rose from the typewriter, put an affectionate arm round Jenny, and pulled out the arm-chair for her.

"Sit right there, dear," she said. "We won't be a minute with him."

"Didn't expect this, Ellen. . . ." said Power, huskily. "I always played straight with you."

"But you didn't," said Jenny quietly. "That's just the trouble, Michael."

Suddenly he collapsed into a chair, covered his face with his hands, and blubbered like a child.

"Captain, you've got nothing on me! Honest to mercy you haven't. There she is—what harm have I done her? What harm has anyone done her?"

The lawyer was watching him with cold, inexorable eyes, as if he were waiting for Palke to move. But it was Jenny—neither then nor afterwards could I think of her by any name but that—who spoke.

"I want to ask you one question, Michael."

He looked up eagerly, ignoring us all and turning to her.

"Yes?" he said.

"Did you know, when you went through that form of marriage with me, that your wife was living?" said Jenny.

Power gasped.

"How could I know? I never knew till—till——"

For a moment he checked himself.

". . . till just before I was arrested in Quebec and went down for eighteen months. An' that's God's truth!"

Jane Carthew stripped the sheet of paper from the typewriter.

"Sure of that, Michael?" she said. "Put your name to this—'I, Michael Power of Deer Lake, Michigan, declare that when I went through a form of marriage with Elaine Corbyn in 1927, at ——, fill in the place and date here—I believed that there was no legal impediment to the marriage, and that my wife, Kathleen Power, whom I married at ——, place and date again, fill them in with your own hand—was dead.'"

Power looked up at her as she stood over him, and at Palke's stony, expressionless face.

"Think it over. Give you one minute," said Jane Carthew.

He picked up the pen mechanically, and wrote. It was as much as he could do to control the shaking of his fingers. She watched his hand as he filled in the dates, and taking the paper from him handed it to Palke, who glanced at it and passed it to Strachey. Power sat staring before him dully.

"Steve gone? Thought he was done, long ago. Katty . . . there's nothing I'd put past her. Nor that devil Jake. I didn't know. . . ."

"You didn't know! What brought you here seeking Elaine Corbyn?" said Palke. "Michael, you paid your passage with a hundred-dollar bill—one of five sent to you from London."

Power swayed blindly in his chair.

"Came to find her . . . warn her. Came on my own . . . can't you understand? And there she is! Lord, you're tearin' the heart out of me!"

He dropped his arms on the desk and buried his face in them, crying brokenly. A moment's pause and Jenny rose, her face flushed and her eyes shining.

"Stop bullying him, all of you!" she said.

She went to Michael's side, touched him lightly on the shoulder. He looked up, his face pulpy and tear-stained. He stared dumbly at a sheaf of rustling notes that she laid before him.

"A debt, Michael," she said, and turned to Charles Flint. "The door! Please! Let him go."

She looked at Palke. Not a muscle of his lean grim face moved. He said nothing when Flint, after a glance at him, softly opened the door. Power peered at us all for a second, dazed, his hand closing nervously on the sheaf of notes.

Then he faded out of the room like a black shadow. I heard a rustle on the stairway and he was gone.

Charlie Flint closed the door with a thrust of his foot and turned to us, his eyes dancing.

"The perfect ending. Miss Corbyn, I congratulate you. And you, Mr. Rolfe. And Jimmy! But most of all, our lady of the Records."

He seized his hat.

"The scoop of a century! Give me an hour's start, Jimmy—I'll be as discreet as I can."

"Good-bye Charlie. You've been a firm ally; you and the *Wire*," said Palke. A whirlwind on the stairs, and Charlie Flint had left us.

My father was laughing softly. Jenny came to my side, her hand stole into mine. Palke alone wore a face of undiminished gloom.

"I was afraid of this; right from the beginning. What

did I tell you, Rolfe? But after all there's nothing we can hold him for except bigamy—not an extraditable offence.”

“We can always get him if we want him,” said Jane Carthew, picking up the typed sheet that Power had signed.

“Are you accepting that confession as fact, Palke?” said Strachey.

“Fact!” said Palke, “the only fact I wanted—unless I could hang him—was the admission that the woman in the cell at Vintner Street is his wife. I never even suspected it.”

“What hold had Kathleen over Michael Power? It must have been a pretty strong one. Jane Carthew’s belief—an inspiration if you like—was that it was marriage.”

“That question to Michael, prompted by Jane Carthew and timed at the exact moment, was a stroke of genius. There was only one answer to it, and having given it he had to stand by it, or condemn himself out of his own mouth.”

“Central Office has records of Kathleen Maguire, sister to Jake, but none connecting her in any way with Power, and it’s exceedingly unlikely we’d ever have got on to that marriage. Very little was known about her; for six years past she’s been lost sight of entirely. And if we hadn’t got her at Vintner Street we might have believed—as Michael says he believed—that she was dead.”

“That broken crook who has just gone out would, I think, have been content to compromise with Elaine Corbyn any time for whatever he could get. Though I do not credit his story, I don’t believe now that murder was ever in his mind. The Maguires would have put that scheme through, but for Jane Carthew—and let me add, Lord Trent—they might well have got away with it.”

“So exit Michael, and he leaves us something of the first value to Miss Corbyn—and I suppose I may say, to you, Mr. Rolfe.”

His ill-humour was forgotten, he turned to us both, his eyes laughing and alight with friendliness.

"No need for the machinery of the law and its delays. No compulsion to sue for the cutting of any thread that binds you to Powers or Maguires, Sing-Sing or the Old Bailey. That marriage was no marriage, and Miss Corbyn is free right there where she stands."

I felt Jenny's hand tighten on mine. And if I were a king and had a brace of peerages to bestow, I would have given them to Palke and Jane Carthew at that moment. Strachey paid his tribute too; he turned to the Inspector, laughing.

"It's not the first time I've heard a policeman cursing the machinery of the law, Palke!" he said, "and I've never done such violence to my professional code as in this case. But without a regret. I haven't the amateur's tenderness for murderers. My sympathy was all for Miss Corbyn. And now I think you'd like to have this room to yourselves."

He bowed to Jenny and my father, and left us.

"Cheer up, Jim!" said Jane Carthew. "See how pleased everybody's looking! And this room's damp enough, the way Michael wept all over the floor."

She turned to my father.

"Does it shock you, Lord Trent, to hear me call the Inspector Jimmy? We all do it at D.C.I. headquarters, we're a friendly crowd there—they call me Jane. He often comes over to us on extradition cases; I've been his colleague before. You needn't believe him when he throws all that credit of the case over to me—it's his way. I've a great respect for Jimmy."

"It's nothing to the respect, mingled with awe, that I've had for you ever since you came to Stanways, Jane," said my father. "Years ago during the War many women wore breeches, and they don't seem to have got over the habit;

I've even seen policewomen on the streets in blue tunics and helmets. Our betters, since they shortened their hair and skirts, are breaking records daily on land, sea and in the air. But I didn't know——"

"That there were women detectives?" laughed Jane Carthew, "and you were right. Mine was a sheltered berth in the Records Office. On every police headquarters staff there are women on women's jobs; D.C.I., Yard, Paris Sureté—officially none of them are sleuths, but now and then they are turned loose on an executive case—not often, because there's a rule that they don't go into the witness stand. I've had the luck to make a hit in one or two big shows, and my Chief trusts me. I guess I've given him a shock this time."

"You've certainly shocked Power and the Maguires. If I had suspected——"

"Come now, Lord Trent!" said Jane, "you may not have guessed you were entertaining a policeman, but as between Jenny and me—I've been calling her Jenny for two months and I've got the habit—you knew within a dozen hours that I was the fake and she was the real thing. You're just about the quickest man I know."

"True Jane. I did have that suspicion. If I'd been really quick I should have known it at first sight."

"Yes! But then I'd have known you were the crook I was looking for, and your troubles would soon have been over. Any man or woman who could pick Jenny out from the pair of us on sight, would have been taped, right away."

"That's why I changed jobs with Jenny before we started for England. A change which took some getting away with, and which I wouldn't have touched under any other conditions; nobody who knew Jenny could mistake me for her. For that very reason—particularly over here three thousand miles from home—it was sound."

"It was sound; and it was horribly dangerous," said Jenny. "I'll never forgive myself to the end of time for letting you do it."

Jane laughed.

"You couldn't help yourself, dear child. Neither of us knew what we were up against. And now, who's going to clear up the Stanways mystery, while the Court sits? Tell them, Jenny!"

Jenny shook her head.

"I leave it to you, partner—please!" said she.

"Very well, then," said Jane Carthew. "Members of the Jury, there'll be no recommendation to mercy."

XLVI

THE TRAP

"JENNY would never have spilled me the story if she hadn't been all wrought up, one night in my flat in New York, and had to tell somebody; I was the only friend she'd got. That was nearly a month after the Slade inheritance fell in."

"We were raised in the same home town, but I'd never heard of Power, he was since my time. I'd found her a job when she came east in the summer, and I'd no idea she'd come into all that money till I got home after a vacation and found her in worse trouble than when she was poor".

"Of course I gave her the only advice anyone could give. But would she have it? You know how obstinate Jenny can be. She couldn't go back on Power. She was his wife, she had taken his money, he'd always played fair, there was nothing to show he wasn't straight—in fact all the stuff you heard just now from Michael."

"One could see her point of view. But directly I got that story I took it privately to D.C.I. headquarters and got our Records Office to tracing Michael Power."

"My Chief didn't think there was much to it. 'This man Power is dead,' said he, 'or he'd have claimed long before now. We've nothing on him, but dead or alive we'll tail him up.'"

"'There's a Power on our register with a bunch of names and three convictions for blackmail,' said I. 'Can I have the job of looking after this girl and watching the case from her end while they're tailing Michael? There are six millions behind it and it's worth watching; it won't cost the Office anything.'"

"And the chief said: 'Go to it, Jane, it's your job. Get in touch with us and we'll keep you posted.'"

"I never believed Power was dead. I was out to get him, and anybody who might be in this crook game with him. But I didn't put that up to Jenny. There was a chance that he'd gone out; there was a smaller chance that, if living, he was straight. And though Jenny put as brave a face on it as she could, she'd have given anything to be quit of it. What was her life going to be, with this thing hanging over her?"

"I told her I would see her safe and clear of it all, if I had her word to obey my instructions and never go back on them or let me down. I knew I could rely on Jenny; she knew she could rely on me."

"She'd had sense enough to lie quiet and insisted on Slade's lawyers giving no information. There was a dame called Alice Vanneck, who got on to the story of the Corbyn money through the lawyers' office. She specialised in business and social introductions; one of those touts everybody knows who are always nosing out a percentage for themselves. Jenny asked her to keep the thing quiet, said she wanted no publicity and was leaving for Europe as soon as the estate was settled."

"Mrs. Vanneck proposed an introduction to Lord Trent, who had a country house in England and took guests; she could be as quiet as she liked there, and do as she pleased. Jenny was all for it. It would keep Mrs. Vanneck quiet too; naturally there'd be a good rake-off for her."

"It sounded all right—well out of harm's way. But when I went into this Stanways proposition, it looked to me like a frame-up."

"My unfortunate reputation!" sighed Dad. Jane laughed.

"I don't know that it was your reputation, Lord Trent, so much as Ken's."

"Don't mind my feelings," said I. "Am I taped in the Records office, too?"

"You were—lucky," said Jane. "You were mixed in some queer doings on our side, and got clear of them. You're a nice big tough, and I rather took to you at Stanways. I tried you out, and if the acid made you sore sometimes, remember I was watch-dog to Jenny, who hasn't forgiven me some of the things I did to you."

"If I was in the dark, so was the opposition. It looked all right from their end. The Linke inquest had led nowhere; the police evidently at a loss. The watchers were holding off to see if the going was still good; they weren't quitters, those sort of crooks seldom are. They needed a certainty. And I determined they should have it."

"Directly Jenny was shifted safely out of Stanways, I laid my trap for them, and a dandy one it was, though I had to turn the plan round later. How else are you to get a crook, in a dark game like that, unless you trap him? Anything's better than letting it hang over you indefinitely."

"I drew up that will, and had it properly signed and witnessed. It had no value—except that it put the Power gang where I wanted them. Of course I never intended being the bait myself; I'm not so heroic as all that."

"Jim Palke had only a misty idea what I was doing at Stanways, and didn't like my being there at all. I was mad with him when he posted his tame policeman to look after me, and drive Jenny's car."

"The shover!" I exclaimed. "Was he——?"

"Yes—the dumb McRae. He's a C Division policeman and an old soldier; he just hung round and kept the car nice."

"I gave the Watcher on Stanways his chance to get into my room and find out all he wanted; the trap was set for the monkey's paw. I'll own right now, I didn't realise it was a tiger rather than a monkey that I was up against.

But I'm always for taking a chance; safety first gets you nowhere in police work. And of course I didn't know I was dealing with Maguire, I thought it was some spy of Michael's nosing out information for his chief. There were plenty of ways of holding up Elaine for a slice of the Slade legacy, and I didn't believe Michael would go the whole hog and risk the gallows."

"Now I was ready for Jim Palke's help. I couldn't chance a failure by trying to finish the job, single-handed; I knew there was more than one in it. Jim was over at Wheatbridge with Begbie. The night of the 14th. And that same night Jenny stalled me by coming back to Stanways—flat against my orders!"

"She'd been good enough till then. Now she tore everything loose. Said we'd got to cut it out . . . she wouldn't have me running risks on her account—had never realised the way it was going—wouldn't stand for it another hour. And she wanted to know what I was doing to you, Ken!"

"I was furious with Jenny. We had our first big row—up in my room. When she left me I was shaken up; and it takes something to shake me. I started overhauling my baggage—and that's when I found that the Watcher had got on to it! Somebody had climbed into my room while we were at dinner and gone through my bureau and papers with a fine-tooth comb; done it very neatly and professionally too.

"Nothing would have pleased me better—if only Jenny were away. I hurried down to dig her out . . . and I found her in the gun-room with you, Ken! I butted into a scene that was never meant for me. . . ."

"I knew that would happen sooner or later. And by this time you'd got me on your side. I dodged out again; it would have been too heartless to interrupt you like that."

"I was feeling wrought up and excited—slipped away to the morning-room, where I knew I'd be alone, to think

things out. Standing by the old marble clock on the mantel, I said to myself: 'We'll give those two babies five minutes; Ken shall drive her back to town for me—I'll be quit of them both.'"

"Then . . . I was off my guard and I'd switched the lights on; a fool thing to do, no doubt . . . the window-sash was snapped up behind me and I whipped round, reaching for my little gun. . . ."

XLVII

CONCLUSION

"Y o u were right, Ken. A woman shouldn't depend on a gun; she may think she's sound but she'll never be in the Maguire class. The gun wasn't part of my plan anyway. But plan—trap—everything went west and I was down and out, feeling as if my head was blown off. Have a bullet cut the veins over your temple, and you'll know. Just a bad graze; but the mess it makes of you!"

"I never knew what hit me; it was all a blurred dream till Ken came and picked me up. I tried to speak to him, and then everything sort of blacked out and I don't remember anything more till I found myself sitting up, feeling mighty weak, alone in that room. And then . . . it didn't take thirty seconds to get me fairly awake. One thing I learned that night—if you get knocked out it's wonderful how a little bleeding clears your brain! I don't believe I ever thought quicker in my life."

"I guessed what Ken was doing . . . and there was the window tight shut, and the gun lying close by. Then up slid the window and in tumbled old McRae with a face on him like doom. He'd heard the shot and came chasing round to see what was doing. He was babbling about a doctor. I got it into his head that I wasn't hurt and that his job was to get me into the car and away to Wheatbridge police-station."

"Mac jumped to it. He ran me down the drive like a mother carrying her nursling, and as soon as the Rolls was started—' Now!' I said, 'whizz me along to Jim Palke as fast as you can burn the ground—keep your lights dowsed and your head shut! We're going to round up a murder gang, you and I Mac—the thug that shot at me is fixed to fall for it with both feet! Let the doc wait.'"

"I bound up my head with a scarf and hardly knew I was hurt. I'd been hunted long enough; now I was the hunter, and it was better even than I'd figured on . . . the plan was flashing up in front of me all the way."

"Jim and Begbie were already at Stanways before we made the station house. The duty sergeant nearly threw a fit when I blew in with my head tied up like a pudding and blood on my dress . . . but he got me to the 'phone and I had Jim at the end of the wire and wised him."

"It was a game Jim Palke could play out better than any man on earth. 'Elaine Corbyn's shot—broadcast that and let it stand till to-morrow,' I said. 'String the gang along . . . let 'em find out who got away with her and why. Wait for them to make the next move, and you'll have them. You'll find Elaine's will and all her papers in the bureau, and I'm here when you want me.'"

"You don't have to spell out the book of words for Jim. That's all I had time to tell him—except that I wasn't hurt. But I could feel myself skidding, and I hung up the receiver and flopped. Silly of me. The station matron put me to bed, Tilden came round presently and mended up Jake's work with a couple of stitches. Jake must have been mad when he knew what he'd missed . . . just as mad with me as Jim Palke was because I'd exceeded instructions. Gee! If the police didn't exceed instructions in a difficult case, murder would be cheaper than it is."

"That's cold truth," said Palke. "Our business is securing the malefactor for the protection of the citizen and I care very little how it's done; but no woman has the right to put herself in the way of a bullet."

Jane laughed. "A scratch like that?" she said, and lifted the brown-gold hair that was waved lower over her forehead than when I saw her last. A ragged red wheal, newly cicatrised, ran back along the white of her temple and lost itself

in her hair. I felt Jenny tremble beside me, and saw Palke's jaw set tight. As for me, if the job of hanging Maguire had been on offer just then, I would have bid for it.

"I was a trifle mad about it myself," said Jane, "but it doesn't show and they tell me I can get it skin-grafted. Jake wasn't so good after all; I guess he's better at a sitting shot. But nobody knew that Elaine Corbyn was living except the police—and Tilden, who holds appointment as police surgeon to the Wheatbridge station. And now you have my report on the Stanways mystery. Jim came round to see me half an hour later. He can tell you the rest."

Palke thrust back his chair.

"There's very little for me to add," he said, "except this warning. If ever you feel the urge to go gunning, Rolfe, don't shoot a policeman. The others will never stop till they get you."

"I left Begbie to hunt out the will. Begbie had it in his head from the start that Lord Trent was the man behind all this trouble. Begbie never guessed that the man who saw farther through the case than anyone up to then—was Lord Trent. Two days later, with his help and Charlie Flint's, we pulled Maguire in."

"The information from New York D.C.I. only began to come through on the 14th. It enabled us to place Kathleen."

"'Linke' was the key to it all. He knew about the Slade inheritance and his brother Michael's marriage—and he was undoubtedly the man who originally put the Maguires wise to it. He was in England when Slade died. The Maguires passed the news to him when they learned that Elaine Corbyn was coming to Stanways, for of course that had leaked out. I should say they got it out of the Vanneck woman. I know nothing against her, but these little social touts will sell anything that's saleable. She certainly passed a paragraph

about it into one of the society columns that she contributes to, spite of her promise to Miss Corbyn."

"Linke's speciality was blackmail, not murder; and when the Maguires shot him to prevent his selling them, they killed the man who could have kept them on the right track. They don't know to this hour that they went after the hawk instead of the pigeon, but if Linke had been at Stanways when the guests arrived I've no doubt he would have spotted the change-over as soon as he saw them. And Jane would have known it, and marked him for the man she wanted."

"I wonder she didn't mark me!" said I, "the way I fell for Jenny on the platform at Euston."

Jane Carthew laughed.

"I saw what your trouble was, you big tough!" she said. "I suspected you of a good many things, but a child could size you up. You did a little suspecting yourself, Ken. You were never cut out for a sleuth, but after being mixed up in our troubles for three days you started asking yourself which of us was the sure-enough Corbyn. Under the circumstances I don't see how you could have missed it. But you didn't try and hide it up; you sprung the idea on Jenny, you big simp! She was bound not to give herself away, and of course she easily pulled you straight again."

"I hated lying to you, Ken," said Jenny. "Did I do it well?"

"Perfectly!" said I. "The prettiest bluff I've ever seen. The way you laughed, before melting into tears, when you said you only wished you were Elaine Corbyn——"

"Well, I thought I was Elaine Power."

"And if that isn't enough to melt anybody to tears, ring me up and tell me what is," said Jane. "A girl's tongue is a better defence to her than a Wesson automatic, and if your wife doesn't smooth you down with an occasional lie you'll

have a thin time of it, Ken. Jimmy needn't think he'll always get the truth out of me when we're married."

I turned to her with a gasp of astonishment. My father smiled at me, and shook his head mournfully.

"This was obvious to everybody but Ken!" he said. "My congratulations, Palke. She is a girl in a thousand. I've been hoping, Jane, that you would marry me."

Jane laughed.

"You always say the right thing. It would be quite attractive to be Lady Trent of Denham. And lucky for you that I'd rather be Mrs. Inspector Palke."

"Mrs. Ex-Inspector Palke," said Jimmy. "I am retiring when the Linke case is through the courts. Jane is handing in her checks at the D.C.I. We're both a little tired of discipline; we are going to run a private agency in Manhattan."

"Jenny is staking us. We might find you a job, Lord Trent, there are the makings of a very sound private detective in you," said Jane. "We've nothing to offer Ken; he couldn't detect a bass drum in a telephone booth. Well, that's my report. All clear?"

"There's one black piece of work nobody has solved yet," said I. "I'd like a settlement with the man that did it. Who sent me that note at Euston warning me off Elaine Corbyn under penalty of death? Neither Power nor the Maguires would have done a thing like that, surely?"

Jane paused. I saw her eye gleam with amusement as she glanced at my father.

"Lord Trent, I believe."

"She's right, as usual," said Dad, and shook with laughter.

"You?" I said, staring at him.

"Guilty, Ken. Before you got to Euston, I 'phoned a friend in town to scribble that message and get it passed to you on the arrival platform—I won't tell you who he was

as I don't want him beaten up. He thought I was pulling your leg. I was in deadly earnest—and so were you after you got that note."

"I've known you twenty-seven years Ken; your obstinacy and pig-headedness. It only needed a threat of trouble if you meddled with the mysterious Miss Corbyn, to start you looking for it. You resented her coming to Stanways and were determined to have nothing to do with her—you were within an ace of bolting. After that threat nobody could have beaten you away from her with a club. It worked like a charm."

"It was well done, Dad!" said Jenny, laughing, and kissed him. He stroked her hair affectionately, and nodding to Jane and Palke, shepherded them out.

"You two will have something more attractive to talk about than crime," he said to me as he closed the door; "if you want us you'll find us at the *Savoy*."

"Didn't Palke tell you once," said Jenny as I drew her down into the arm-chair, "that you'd need all the sympathy you could get? You're going to get it now, Ken. . . ."

I have had it ever since.

THE END





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